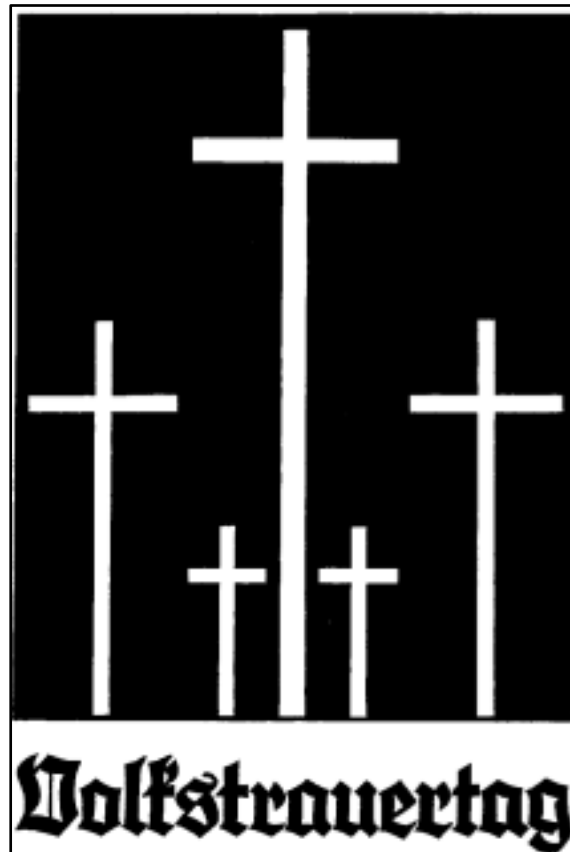


THE INVENTION OF A RITUAL

The Volkstrauertag as an Institution of Memory and the Politics of Identity
in Weimar Germany



Bachelor-Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the image of the First World War as constructed in the ritual of a memorial-day, the *Volkstrauertag*, and explores the role the image played in shaping politically relevant memories in post-war Weimar Germany. The focus here is on the meaning-giving power of a ritual through its rhetoric, symbols, and performances. The analysis also illustrates the process of identity formation by means of constructing a (collective) memory of the past. Pre-war socialization and post-war political allegiance acted as a prism through which the experience of war was refracted. All sorts of groups in Weimar's society used the memory of the war as a medium to further their own political agenda in the highly contested political context of the inter-war years. The *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (VDK), therefore, invented and practiced a ritual saturated with a heroic and glorified image of the war aimed at strengthening the participant's conservative identity and to serve the political agenda of the conservative stratum of society. This thesis opposes a popular lament of historians who have identified the absence of meaning-giving rituals as a seedbed for the Republic's later demise. With its memory politics, the *Volkstrauertag* instead intensified political identities and solidified entrenched tensions among conflicting political groups. The inherent interconnection between political identity and memory, within which the character of the latter is very much a result of the former, is foundational to any understanding of the contested political landscape of the Weimar Republic and its memory politics.

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Introduction

In his keynote speech at the 1926 *Volkstrauertag*, an annual memorial-day in the Weimar Republic dedicated to the memory of the dead German soldiers of World War One, speaker Fritz Siems made a critical observation.¹ The German people, he alerted his audience, are bitterly divided over their politics. Major political conflict had governed them, he argued, since the defeat in war simultaneously crushed political cohesion. The division that held Germany in its firm grip, however, did not stop at the ballot. It precluded, Siems went on, a joint remembrance of the war, which in fact may be the only remedy to this discordant state of affairs. A common ritual for all Germans to commemorate their dead is therefore what the German people need. In the joint memory of the soldier's heroic death in service of protecting the fatherland, Germans will find "a symbol of unity that resolves all our inner conflicts".² Luckily the attendees found themselves to be present at just such a ritual. The president of the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (VDK), the event's organiser, concluded his speech by pointing out that "the Volkstrauertag means we – for now and then forever – defer everything that splits us, we defer all we may individually desire, and we defer everything we fret about. Volkstrauertag means, after all, to unite again in our shared memory of the war".³

Historians of Weimar Germany agree with Siems that Weimar's democracy remained a platform of contestation for conflicting political ideologies throughout its existence.⁴ And just as Siems acknowledges the disintegrative consequences of the war, historians equally maintain that the shadow the war had cast upon the new-born republic was the decisive feature of its political, economic, social, and even cultural life.⁵ The interpretation of the past and its meaning for the present was indeed so disputed among the

¹ In Britain, the equivalent memorial-day to the Volkstrauertag is called Remembrance Day. In the literal translation Volkstrauertag means 'the people's day of mourning'. If not indicated otherwise, the author has translated (and therefore takes full responsibility for) all of this thesis' quotations derived from its main primary source, the VDK's member magazine *Kriegsgäberfürsorge*.

² Fritz Siems, 'Begrüßungsworte des Präsidenten des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Pfarrer Siems, Charlottenburg, in der Gedenkfeier im Reichstag am Volkstrauertag 1926', *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, March 1926, 35, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

³ Siems, 35; Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge translates into "German War Grave Commission".

⁴ Manuela Achilles argues that historians should see Weimar's democracy as a playing field of a political contest for forms of representations, thus, a platform of contestation. See: Manuela Achilles, 'Anchoring the Nation in the Democratic Form: Weimar Symbolic Politics Beyond the Failure Paradigm', in *German Modernities from Wilhelm to Weimar: A Contest of Futures*, ed. Geoff Eley, Jennifer Jenkins, and Tracie Matysik (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 264.

⁵ Krumeich claims the war had 'the most decisive imprint on the Weimar Republic, which was born from the war and remained a child of the Great War throughout its existence'. As quoted in: Gerd Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage: das Trauma des Ersten Weltkriegs und die Weimarer Republik* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2018), 11.

various political camps, nothing short of a “civil war of remembrance” actually governed Weimar’s political culture.⁶ In fact, recent scholarship on republican memory activism has brought to light the diversity of active political groups. These historians refute the long-held dictum of the ‘republic without republicans’.⁷ Yet despite Siems’ claim to offer – in form of the Volkstrauertag – a platform of coalescence and settlement to this conflict-ridden society, in reality the memory of the war was one of the *most* contested of all political platforms. The Volkstrauertag was no exception.

The arena of war memory was for most memory actors a platform on which to further their political agenda. Siems remark about the lack of a joint form of remembrance was accurate although he, himself, made a political argument by suggesting the Volkstrauertag as a unifying ritualistic act. This reveals the inherent interconnection between political identity and memory that was present in Weimar Germany. Political identity was a product of memory. In a recent study on what he calls Germany’s “trauma of defeat”, the historian Gerd Krumeich emphasises this interconnection by claiming that personal memories of the Great War played an imperative role for the construction of political identities.⁸ The degree to which Germans represented the memory of defeat as either a source of national humiliation or as a window of opportunity was a pivotal factor in their degree of identification with the Republic. For those who were more inclined to the former, these sentiments of humiliation became anchored in their memory of the war and thus became seeds of a strong vengeful nationalism. The seedbed for this “culture of hate” was the platform of memory. According to this line of argument, no memory actor succeeded in establishing forms of commemoration, neither memorials nor memorial-days, good enough to provide remedy to the dissociation the

⁶ Robert Gerwarth, ‘The Past in Weimar History’, *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 01 (March 2006): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003067>; I employ the term ‘political culture’ in the meaning Lynn Hunt has outlined in her study on the invention of revolutionary politics in the French Revolution. To Hunt, political culture subsumes the ‘values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions.’ Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 20. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 10–11.

⁷ To show the diversity of players active in the arena of memory politics recent scholarship has focused more on popular republican forms of remembrance. See, inter alia: Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Eric Bryden, ‘Heroes and Martyrs of the Republic: Reichsbanner Geschichtspolitik in Weimar Germany’, *Central European History* 43, no. 04 (December 2010): 639–65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938910000749>; Sean A. Forner, ‘War Commemoration and the Republic in Crisis: Weimar Germany and the Neue Wache’, *Central European History* 35, no. 04 (December 2002): 513–49, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916102770891179>; Nadine Rossol, ‘Visualising the Republic – Unifying the Nation. The Reichskunstwart and the Creation of Republican Representation and Identity in Weimar Germany.’ (Dissertation, University of Limerick, 2006).

⁸ Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 211.

defeat had brought.⁹ The substantial academic canon on Weimar Germany's political culture therefore often attributes the Republic's later failure to a lethal deficit of meaning-giving political symbolism.

In recent years historians have gradually moved the debate away from the Weimar failure paradigm that looked upon the Republic merely as an antechamber to the Third Reich. In shifting their attention to the middle years (1924-1929) they caused a historiographical transformation, which declined to think Weimar primarily from its eventual dissolution. Especially a fresh scholarly interest in republican forms of civil activism has shown that indeed during these years the Republic was not bound to fail. Historians have demonstrated how especially republican civic groups established rituals of commemoration full of democratic imagery. Republicans framed the defeat in war as a window of opportunity that allowed for the establishment of a Republic after centuries of hereditary rule. From this perspective the Republic's iterative crises appear more as realms of opportunity.¹⁰

In light of these two historiographic currents it appears remarkable that the Volkstrauertag has largely been neglected in academia thus far.¹¹ It was arguably one of the most visible, vocal, and successful attempts to establish a ritual to commemorate the dead. In part this lack reflects a more general neglect of rituals and performances in the study of Weimar Germany's war memory. Historians paid only marginal attention to the power of

⁹ Through an analytical prism with substantial socio-psychological elements, Krumeich attests the Weimar Republic an unsolved trauma. Being unable to find an appropriate form to commemorate the war, in which both the suffering of the soldiers and their sacrifice for the nation took centre stage, the state eventually left the arena of commemoration vacant. This void was later filled by the revengeful narrative of the national-socialists. See: Krumeich, 11–16.

¹⁰ According to this perspective, Weimar is only studied in a quest to find the roots for its later demise. This (as some argue) anachronistic approach remained popular for quite long in academic debate. In it, Weimar looks like it was doomed to fail and is therefore predominantly positioned as the antechamber of the Third Reich. For literature to counter the Weimar failure paradigm see, among others: Kathleen Canning, 'The Politics of Symbols, Semantics, and Sentiments in the Weimar Republic', *Central European History* 43, no. 04 (December 2010): 567–80; Manuela Achilles, 'With a Passion for Reason: Celebrating the Constitution in Weimar Germany', *Central European History* 43, no. 04 (December 2010): 666–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938910000750>; Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*.

¹¹ At the time of writing no studies on the Volkstrauertag exist in English. In German, only a handful studies centre fully on this important memorial-day. Jan-Henrik Meyer, in his now twenty years old project, provides the reader with a thorough discourse analysis of all speeches held on the Volkstrauertag from 1922 until 1989. See: Jan-Henrik Meyer, 'Die Reden Auf Den Zentralen Veranstaltungen Zum Volkstrauertag Bzw. Zum Heldengedenktag 1922-1989' (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2001); Another analysis concentrates mainly on legal aspects and the evolving nature of institutionalization and surrounding political conflicts. See: Thomas Peter Peterson, *Die Geschichte des Volkstrauertags*, 2nd ed. (Kassel: Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V., 1998); The most recent study is also the most extensive available. Alexandra Kaiser provides a full history of the Volkstrauertag from its origins in the last years of World War One until the recent present. It is the only study to consider ritualistic aspects as well. See: Alexandra Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern: eine Geschichte des Volkstrauertags*, Campus historische Studien 56 (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 2010).

rituals as *practised symbols*, although the discipline as a whole has recognized the power of images and symbols in political culture. The Volkstrauertag, however, epitomises such a practised symbol: For the years from when it first took place in 1922 until the last time in 1932, it remained the sole ritual to commemorate the war dead that became known all over the German Reich and also assumed a state-like character.

A practised symbol such as a ritual can be described as a set of political practices that are invested with values and meaning and follow a particular and integrative pattern.¹² Rituals such as an annual memorial-day assume patterns when they are repeatedly practised. The choreographies become manifest in performances, speeches, and material symbols. These patterns can be percussed to identify overarching and integrative characteristics. The question is, then, what image of the war was implicit in the ritual (practised symbol) of the Volkstrauertag as conducted in the decade between 1922-1932? What memories did the VDK invest in the many aspects of the ritual, including the choice of its date, the decoration of the venue, the allegorical themes of the delivered keynote addresses, and the performances? And finally, what does the promotion of such a specific war-memory tell us about the political culture of the Weimar Republic?

To answer these questions, it is essential to understand the social milieu of the core members of the VDK. Nearly all of them grew up among the elite of the Wilhelmine empire. This elite ascribed to a specific form of nationalism that was reminiscent of the old imperial and militaristic order. They praised a spiritual unity of the people as the highest merit of the nation. This political ideology then found expression in the way the VDK, after years of political activism, moulded and fashioned the Volkstrauertag. An analysis of the VDK's own magazine, the *Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (KGF), and additional primary sources such as photographs taken at the event, has shown that the ritual was saturated with strongly vengeful and nationalistic symbolism.¹³ The date of the ritual, the second Sunday of Lent *Reminiscere*, for instance, is associated with the hope of a national resurrection to Germany's past grandeur. Many members of the old elite fostered this hope after the defeat in World War One. Militaristic elements in form of the participating guard of honour of the *Reichswehr* (German army) further overshadowed the mournful features within which the Volkstrauertag was embedded.

¹² This analytical frame is an adoption of Lynn Hunt's definition of 'political culture' that she uses in her study on the politics of symbolism of the French Revolution. Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 15.

¹³ Translates roughly into 'war grave care'. The VDK simply named its magazine according to its prime responsibility, the setting up and maintaining of war graves. More information on the VDK follows in the first chapter.

Most of the keynote addresses delivered at the Volkstrauertag were printed in the KGF.¹⁴ The rhetoric that can be found in these addresses is a consciously and intentionally chosen form of expression and hence yields valuable insights into the memory of the First World War.¹⁵ The exegesis of the rhetoric therefore yields the second important understanding. The VDK remembered the war as a time during which the German people were united and the soldiers at the front fought heroically until they sacrificed their own life in the defence of the fatherland. They did this by means of the *myth of the unity of the Volk* and the *myth of comradeship*, the two dominant political myths that occur in the speeches.

But speeches are more than just rhetorical exercises on the printed page. By definition speeches are delivered live, to an audience; their meaning is conveyed through acoustic intonations and accentuations as much as the words in themselves. Although from 1926 onwards at least one national radio station broadcasted the whole Volkstrauertag live there are no remaining copies of the speeches in audio format left.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the fact alone they were broadcast is of great importance. As Benedict Anderson has shown, the ability of mass media to spread ideas and images among people who live in great geographic distance is pivotal to the construction of the imagined community of the nation.¹⁷ The construction of a communal memory of the First World War among Germans hence depended on mass media to disperse said memory. Unfortunately, no statistics exist to show how many people might have listened to the speeches. The radio was a fascinating new medium at the time and quickly became a mass medium as well. Especially at remarkable occasions people used to join in large crowds to collectively listen to the broadcasting. Alexandra Kaiser therefore argues that the radio significantly assisted the VDK in spreading its image of the war to a national audience.¹⁸

¹⁴ For the years 1922, 1924, and 1927 no full copies exist; the speech given in 1927 therefore misses completely in this analysis. In 1923 the Volkstrauertag did not take place. The speeches from 1922 and 1924 were preserved only fragmentary but are still complete enough to derive substantial information from them: I retrieved the 1922' speech as a synopsis from a doctoral thesis and the 1924' speech I found printed partly in the KFS. The president of the VDK or his deputy usually delivered the keynote speech at the VTT. Exceptions are the above-named speech from 1922 and the speech delivered by another parliamentarian, Dr. Wilhelm Kahl (DVP) in 1930. Authorship of the speeches cannot be proven, yet I assume it is unlikely any speaker would have delivered a speech without accepting the speeches' content.

¹⁵ Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 25–27.

¹⁶ Eulen mentions the first broadcasting of the Volkstrauertag in his report on the celebrations in 1926. See: Siegfried Emmo Eulen, 'Unser diesjähriger Volkstrauertag 1926', *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1926, 50, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London, New York: Verso, 2016).

¹⁸ The *Deutsche Welle* was the first national radio station to broadcast the Volkstrauertag live. Kaiser includes a brief analysis of the radio broadcasting of the Volkstrauertag in her book. She asserts that

The analysis of the live aspects is, however, essential to reconstruct the ritual of the Volkstrauertag in its entirety. Lastly, a scrutiny of reports in the KGF about one of the performances that took place at the Volkstrauertag carries the third claim of this thesis. The VDK instantiated parts of its Volksbundideologie, namely the widely praised unity of the Volk, by the joint singing of a popular soldier song called *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden* (I once had a comrade).

These diverse aspects comprised the memory of the war the Volkstrauertag epitomises. The repetitive nature of the annual Volkstrauertag, whereby over the years its particular memories of the war became engraved in its various choreographies, turned it into an institution of memory.¹⁹ It had developed into a fully fleshed-out ritual by 1925. Historians can hardly maintain the standpoint longer, which claims the Republic had a lethal deficit of symbolic politics. However, the values and meanings invested in this memory institution were saturated with nationalistic, often anti-democratic and vengeful, and glaringly militaristic elements. The deliberate politicization of the war memory therefore contributed to solidifying divisions that ran through German society. Even if it is not responsible for causing the Republic's demise.

The deliberate, highly calculated nature of political rituals is significant for at least two reasons. First, memory politics, the politics with memories of history, employs political rituals as medium to communicate a version of the past that serves certain political agendas. The driving motive behind memory politics is the cultural and political importance of having a particular moment or version of history represented.²⁰ For example, keynote speakers explicitly stated their desire to “bring the nation together in this one memory of the war”.²¹ The VDK framed a ritual of collective remembrance in their particular version of the past. Second, rituals are highly authoritative because other than habits or customs they follow very strict rules. Their completed design is not open to any ad-hoc variations anymore and therefore prescribes to the participants the experience (‘what it does to them’) they live

the mass medium created a to date unknown potential for the VDK to distribute its propaganda to a national audience. The broadcasting must have been successful, she asserts, because it conveyed the VDK's messages live, and therefore evoked a sentiment of taking part. Moreover, since not too many people owned a radio themselves, people usually joined as crowds to listen to the radio. This created a feeling of communal experience that further added to the excitement of the individual listener. Kaiser therefore assumes that broadcasting the Volkstrauertag successfully spread its particular memory to a large audience. See: Kaiser, 166–71.

¹⁹ Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 60–62.

²⁰ Wüstenberg outlines some core characteristics of memory politics and analytical terms for historical analysis of memory politics. See: Jenny Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 19.

²¹ Siegfried Emmo Eulen, ‘Volkstrauertag 1925’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1925, 43, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

through. As such any ritualistic experience shares a property of wholeness, which the creators of a ritual deliberately designed for a particular public.²² As the ritual prescribes the experience, it also assumes a certain authority over the interpretation of the past. It very much tells one how to remember the past.

Hence, the involved memory actors, agents who seek to shape public remembrance, took deliberate decisions and therefore consciously sought to construct a particular memory of the war.²³ To see the ritual of the Volkstrauertag as a consciously and intentionally chosen form of expression is therefore an important prism: on the one hand it emphasises human agency, which then on the other hand allows to frame memory construction as a rational tool of memory politics. All this speaks for the argument that the VDK deliberately constructed the Volkstrauertag as a memory institution saturated with a militaristic, nationalistic, and vengeful memory of the war and chose specific ritualistic acts, decorations, a certain rhetoric and overall design of the ritual to forward what is essentially a political argument in the midst of the highly contested political context of the Weimar years.

²² Stephan Feuchtwang, 'Ritual and Memory', in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 284.

²³ Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory*, 11.

Chapter One.

Origins of the VDK and the invention of the ritual of the Volkstrauertag

The persistent activism by the VDK during the Weimar years ensured the invention of the Volkstrauertag as a consolidated ritual with a clear set of practices and invested meanings.²⁴ The ritual constructed and practiced a vengeful and glorified image of the war that was supposed to strengthen the participant's conservative identity. It also served to further the political agenda of the conservative stratum of society. The role played by political identities in tinting the memory of the war is foundational to any understanding of the Volkstrauertag, as explained in the first section below. This is evident from the social composition of the VDK and its ideology, which were both formative in the conservative design of the Volkstrauertag. This process is a prime example of the politicisation of the war memory in Weimar Germany. As shown in the second section, the Volkstrauertag served more as a platform to conduct conservative politics rather than as a ritual to solely mourn the dead. The last point of this section also adds to this argument. The VDK decided to conduct the Volkstrauertag at the second Sunday in Lent right before Easter to symbolise, analogue to Christ's and nature's resurgence, the nation's resurrection. It also fashioned the venue of the ritual in palpable militaristic posture. All this illustrates how the Volkstrauertag served chiefly as a tool to advance a conservative political agenda by winning sovereignty over the interpretation of the past on the Republic's highly contested platform of remembrance.

The VDK – its members and ideology

By the end of the First World War an increasing number of people grew concerned over the state's inability to take care of the many war graves the four years of military conflict had brought. Consequently, they formed an organisation in order to fill in for the financially exhausted state, which also seemed to fall apart politically by autumn 1918. The resultant Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (VDK) initially saw it as its main responsibility to collect funds and organise the logistics behind the establishment of war graves at all former theatres of war. The absence of a consolidated

²⁴ The term "invention" with regard to a ritual is borrowed from Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's iconic study into the invented nature of traditions, especially those of nationalism. See: E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

state further enlarged its responsibilities. The public commemoration of those lost during the war became its second main task. This was due to two reasons. For once, the state happily transferred the responsibility for both war grave care and commemoration to the VDK. It hoped a private organisation could operate more freely in the lands of their former antagonists. Given the highly strained foreign relations during the peace-treaty negotiations at Versailles, a private organisation was plus independent to invent public commemoration without arousing significant international political conflict.

Yet the wish to popularise a certain public commemoration also originated from within the VDK.²⁵ The main founding figure of the VDK, Sigmund Emmo Eulen, claimed in 1921 a chief objective from the start was to “influence the people” in their memory of the war.²⁶ The goal here was to further milieu-based politics, which the VDK persistently exercised during the years. This desire to turn the memory of the war into a medium of politics originated from their position in a society that was strictly fragmented according to social and religious affiliations.²⁷

In the early twentieth century the Germany’s political system consisted of a multiplicity of political subcultures, none of which assumed political hegemony, and among which little interaction occurred.²⁸ Instead, individual affiliations to specific social milieus largely determined the individual’s political ideology. Political scientist Karl Rohe proposed this correlation on the basis of statistical data from voter-behaviour in elections for the Republic’s parliament. Especially telling is his assertion that German society roughly consisted of three clusters, the nationalists, the socialists, and the ecclesiastical communities, all of which can be allocated to specific social-milieus. These were also bound to geographically situated but often separated locations in the

²⁵ For origins and tasks of the VDK, see: Johann Zilien, ‘Der Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. Während Der Weimarer Republik’, *Archiv Für Kulturgeschichte* 75, no. 2 (January 1993): Here especially 446-53., <https://doi.org/10.7788/akg.1993.75.2.445>.

²⁶ Siegfried Emmo Eulen, ‘Volkstrauertag 1922’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1922, 38, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

²⁷ German sociologist Rainer Lepsius could show, by means of statistical analysis, how persistent social group affiliation remained for most of the Weimar Republic. Social mobility was low and restrained to similar social milieus. Moreover, Lepsius argues for a causal relation between social group affiliation and political ideology, as manifest in milieu-specific voter-behavior; the link between the two phenomena remained stable at least until the mid-nineteen-twenties. See: M. Rainer Lepsius, *Demokratie in Deutschland: soziologisch-historische Konstellationsanalysen. Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 11–25.

²⁸ Jürgen W. Falter, ‘The Social Bases of Political Cleavages in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933’, in *Elections, Mass Politics and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives*, ed. James Retallack and Larry Eugene Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 371, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139052580.016>.

Weimar period.²⁹ The socialists originated predominantly from the urban working class, nationalists largely from the urban upper classes, and Catholics and Lutherans mostly from the agrarian countryside. Interestingly, all groups tended to vote for their own respective parties.³⁰ It is therefore plausible to assume the VDK's members were also unified in a common political ideology. Large numbers of its members stemmed from a homogenous social milieu. They were primarily socialized in the nationalistic, conservative, and urban upper-class.³¹ They were employed as public servants, (formerly) in the military, worked in banks and had high-level occupations in the industrial sector.³² The leadership of the VDK drew its members from a similar social pool.³³

Many of the VDK's members were part of the elite before the war. They reached adulthood in the Empire in Wilhelmine-times, whose elite ascribed to a nationalism firmly anchored in culture and geography.³⁴ Their joint belief developed over the years into a closely affiliated version of that nationalism. Alexandra Kaiser has identified this version as an integrative ideology and consequently termed the ideology of the VDK the *Volksbundideologie*.³⁵ Note that this form of nationalism was still inertly different from the new racist nationalism that gained increasing popularity in the nineteen-twenties. The *Volksbundideologie*, while also anti-pluralistic and anti-democratic, was more of an antiquated nationalism that reminisced about the old order.

Next to its political features it consisted of ideas about societies' proper spiritual state. These ideals originated from a romantic's appropriation of nineteenth-century philosophical idealism, namely an appropriation of the concept of *spirit*, to a national

²⁹ Applegate argues that "German public life failed in important ways to integrate these separate spheres of the social and political life and thus remained fragmented by geography - by 'place' - well into the Weimar period." See: Celia Applegate, 'Democracy or Reaction? The Political Implications of Localist Ideas in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany', in *Elections, Mass Politics and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives*, ed. James Retallack and Larry Eugene Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 248.

³⁰ Similar to Lepsius, Rohe traces a higher fluctuation in voter-behaviour for the later years, but asserts a considerable continuation of social-group-based voting-behaviour during the early years. See: Karl Rohe, *Wahlen Und Wählertraditionen in Deutschland*, 1. ed., Neue Historische Bibliothek (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 149–64.

³¹ Zilien, 'Der Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. Während Der Weimarer Republik', 468.

³² Zilien's study is the only at hand that provides demographic information about the members of the VDK during the Weimar Republic. See: Zilien, 468–69.

³³ Meyer, 'Die Reden Auf Den Zentralen Veranstaltungen Zum Volkstrauertag Bzw. Zum Heldengedenktag 1922-1989', 46.

³⁴ Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 48.

³⁵ Ideology of the VDK (Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge). In: Kaiser, 82.

body. *Georg Hegel* (1770-1831) in his seminal 1807' work on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, used the term *Volksgeist* (national spirit) to denote the separate spiritual essences of the diverse nations that characterized the present stage of human history.³⁶ In the later appropriation of the term, especially romantics such as German philosopher *Johann Gottfried Herder* (1744-1803) defined the *Volksgeist* as a transcendental, communally shared spirit or unique character of a nation. They used the concept of the *Volksgeist* explicitly as counter-proposal to the wide-spread attempts by contemporaries to solely define nations politically. In a similar manner, the VDK's nationalism identified the *Volksgeist* as a shared spiritual and transcendent unity of the people that goes beyond politics. The ideal of the unity of the German Volk epitomizes a core ideal of the *Volksbundideologie*. To exemplify this, see how Wilhelm Kahl addresses the assembled crowd in the Reichstag at the Volkstrauertag on March 16, 1930:

Today, we have gathered around the fatherland ... It is with purpose I don't say: around the state. In our attitude towards the state we might disagree. But in our attitude towards the fatherland nothing may separate us ... To you, the difference between the two may not be immediately clear. Because for you the duty to be loyal to them both till death is just the same. However, there is a difference. The state usually is the realistic foundation for the fatherland. But not exclusively so! Everyone has a fatherland, even if he is stateless. The state guarantees justice and order. It is a sober and abstract undertaking. But the fatherland relates to the most inner emotions of the people; it finds its expression in the highest of all feelings of happiness, the unity of the fatherland. It has no place and it is not geographically bound. The *invisible unity* lives in the *united Volk*, no matter where its members are.³⁷

Kahl differentiates between the state and the fatherland, so between a transient political condition and an eternal cultural or even spiritual condition of affiliation. In this

³⁶ The term *Volksgeist* was coined by *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel* (1770–1831) to denote the separate spiritual essences of the diverse nations that characterized the present stage of human history and that would, through a dialectical process, produce the uniform 'world-spirit' which spelled history's end. The idea that each nation possesses something like a unique spiritual essence was later picked up by romantic nationalist such as *Johann Gottfried Herder* (1744-1803). Herder is widely acknowledged to be the first who "brought most of the conventional elements of *Volksgeist* together into a coherent whole, represented nations as embodiments of unique sets of cultural characteristics in explicit opposition to attempts to define nations politically." As quoted in: Woodruff D. Smith, 'Volksgeist', in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (The Gale Group, 2005), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/volksgeist>.

³⁷ Italics mine. Wilhelm Kahl, 'Gedenkrede des Geh. Justizrats Prof. Dr. Kahl, M.d.R, am Volkstrauertag 1930 im Plenarsitzungssaal des Reichstages', *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1930, 57, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

distinction Kahl follows Hegel's understanding of the *Volksgeist*. He also frames the spiritual state of unity as being *above* politics. However, Kahl and other speakers often broke down the strict independence that separates the two according to Hegel, thereby framing the unity of the Volk as above but not *beyond* politics. This twist allowed them to identify the political conflicts of their time as being detrimental to the ideal unity of the Volk. Kahl later, in order to make this kind of argument plausible, called both phenomena "converging manifestations of a higher form of human community" that "are closely interrelated".³⁸ Hence, disunity in matters political affected the spiritual unity of Germans.

The existence of separate social groups fragmented the society of Weimar Germany. Social upbringing had pivotal influence on the political ideologies of individuals living at the time. The members of VDK generally ascribed to an ideal of nationalism that emphasized the unity of the people as its highest merit. As they saw it, political dissent in society was powerful enough to disintegrate this (spiritual) unity. The *Volksbundideologie* converged political with philosophical ideals, which both deeply impacted the VDK's members. As a consequence they designed the *Volkstrauertag* in a profoundly conservative manner. Pre-war socialization and post-war political allegiance also acted as a prism through which the experience of war was refracted, as the following section shows.³⁹ By restricting membership via proxy of identifying itself with such an ideology, the VDK was free, although not uncontested, to lobby for the institutionalisation of a memorial-day much to its own liking.

The institutionalization of the Volkstrauertag

The Weimar government in its early days was anxious to distance itself from the pompous ceremonial acts of the imperial court and therefore wilfully abstained from any symbolic grandeur.⁴⁰ The VDK quickly attempted to fill the resultant symbolic vacuum. By 1921, its organisational structures, financial power, and most importantly the ideological will were already tightened enough as to pursue a public commemoration of the war victims on its own. In the same year the VDK for the first

³⁸ Kahl, 57.

³⁹ As a result of which 'there was thus no dominant memory of the war before 1933'. My argument is partly based on this observation by Alan Kramer. See: Alan Kramer, 'The First World War and German Memory', in *Untold War: New Perspectives in First World War Studies*, ed. Heather Jones, Jennifer O'Brien, and Christoph Schmidt-Supprian, 1. ed., History of Warfare Series (Leiden: BRILL, 2008), 390.

⁴⁰ Achilles, 'Anchoring the Nation in the Democratic Form', 264.

time openly advocated in favour of a memorial-day in its own member magazine.⁴¹ From then on, the leadership began its persistent lobbying-activities. Numerous times it approached the government, its ministers, and the parliament. The personal influence of the leadership proved pivotal for that. Their interconnection with the political and economic elite of the post-war order opened many doors and secured, for instance, the Reichstag as venue for the ritual. Despite these personal connections their initial aim to first get legal status for ‘their’ Volkstrauertag as a national holiday failed. The VDK became impatient and organised its first event in 1922 without the legal status. Internal disputes forestalled its continuation in 1923, but from 1924 onwards the VDK managed the yearly execution of its Volkstrauertag. It took the sole responsibility for shaping it and by 1925 the memorial-day had assumed most of its unvarying ritualistic elements. The ritual indeed remained analogous over the years until the NSDAP took over governmental powers in 1932.⁴² Yet even during the Weimar years the VDK’s claim to “unify the people in common remembrance” was never left uncontested by opposing political groups.⁴³

In general, political conflicts routinely surfaced when the public discussed any form of commemoration. For instance, the attempt by *Reichskunstwart* Edwin Redslob to establish a national memorial dedicated to the dead of World War One, ended in heated political conflict. His office was located at the intersection of art and politics and therefore responsible for official state acts and architectural representation of the state. Yet even Redslob never achieved to finalise the memorial due to severe opposition from various political groups. This showcases the inherently conflicted nature of war commemoration in Germany and the state’s impotence with regards to memory politics.⁴⁴

As this section shows, conflicts – like opposition from the two German

⁴¹ Siegfried Emmo Eulen, ‘Ein Trauertag dem Deutschen Volk’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, January 1921, 5, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

⁴² Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers’ Party).

⁴³ Siegfried Emmo Eulen, ‘Unser erster Volkstrauertag 1925’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, March 1925, 18, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

⁴⁴ The Reichskunstwart was a newly established government agency that worked to transform the national symbols of sovereignty and authority. In his biography about Edwin Redslob author Michael Weizenbacher sketches the severe political conflicts that emerged with any new proposal for memorial activities. He concludes that Weimar Germany’s society, simply put, was ideologically too divided to unite in an integrative memory. See: Christian Welzbacher, *Edwin Redslob: Biographie Eines Unverbesserlichen Idealisten*, 1. (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2009), 142–50 ; Those who do not read German, see for a similiar argument: Rossol, ‘Visualising the Republic’.

Churches – surrounded the institutionalization of the Volkstrauertag too, demonstrating again how the memory of the war was a site of contestation for political disputes in Weimar Germany. Yet the institutionalization of remembrance not only functioned as a catalyst for conflicts among political groups with diverging ideologies and ideas about the position of the war in public memory. More than that, it became the very medium through which political groups, now operating as memory actors, conducted their politics and communicated their political ideologies.

Briefly after the war each political faction in society had established clear cut concepts of how they envisioned a proper commemoration of the dead.⁴⁵ The political left, for instance, deliberately restrained from any grand architectural or ritualistic projects. It instead aimed to donate all funds to war invalids. They held it morally permissible to honour the soldiers by supporting social initiatives designed to secure their material needs. In the midst of the economically exhausted post-war order many war veterans found themselves in a devastating social situation. Spending money on memorials and other symbolic gestures instead of sustaining the material needs of the veterans seemed inappropriate to them. The political right instead advocated zealously for a symbolic and ritualistic form of commemoration, mostly in form of memorial-days.⁴⁶ To conduct a certain kind of memory politics was therefore already a political argument in itself. Consequently, any established form of commemoration served political groups as mediums to communicate their agendas.

The VDK made various symbolic claims through means of the Volkstrauertag. One highly symbolic claim is mirrored in the decision to conduct the Volkstrauertag on a particular date. Two points were of importance here to the VDK. First, to further its claim to represent *all* Germans the VDK had to find a secular date that was markedly different from the two denominational days of remembrance of the death that already existed.⁴⁷ The Catholic Church in Germany commemorates their dead on the second of

⁴⁵ This argument rests on a broad generalization about political groups and their ideologies in respect to memory politics; the differences between political groups cannot be defined by institutional affiliations but rests on general trends in their memory politics as associated with the respective political groups and their social backgrounds. My argument resembles Christian Saehrendt's analysis of memory politics according to political group affiliation in Weimar Germany. See: Christian Saehrendt, *Der Stellungskrieg der Denkmäler: Kriegerdenkmäler im Berlin der Zwischenkriegszeit (1919 - 1939)*, Reihe: Politik- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte 64 (Bonn: Dietz, 2004), 21–30.

⁴⁶ Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 59–60.

⁴⁷ Eulen claims the Volkstrauertag needs to be 'acknowledged in its entirety'. This, he continues, can only be possible without 'the Churches casting their shadows' over a 'national memorial-day'. In: Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag', 38.

November, on *Allerseelentag* (All Souls' Day), while the Lutheran Church does so on the last Sunday of the German ecclesiastical year, the *Totensonntag* (Sunday of the Dead).⁴⁸ The VDK chose a diverging date in spring instead of winter. Thereby it could distance itself from the Churches' commemoration of the dead and evoke a symbolism that fitted its *Volksbundideologie* much better.

The VDK's second aim was to connect the remembrance of the dead soldiers with the season of spring.⁴⁹ In a speech delivered at the *Volkstrauertag* in 1926 speaker Fritz Siems precisely captured the symbolic meaning of the date when he noted that "the approaching spring makes one think of resurrection. A resurrection of both the nature and the fatherland."⁵⁰ The VDK's preferred date evoked a strong double symbolism because the spring season equals the time of Lent in the liturgical calendar. It linked Christ's and the nature's resurgence with the nation's symbolic resurrection. The VDK could thereby translate natural and ecclesiastical symbolism into a nationalistic symbolism that formed a crucial part of its *Volksbundideologie*. The ideology was deeply reminiscent of the old order and the lost national greatness of the Empire. It therefore consciously charged the date with a call for a political and spiritual resurrection of the German nation after defeat in the Great War. In a way, the act of imposing a specific meaning on this date turned it into an immaterial site of memory. After years of repetition the date automatically evoked a memory of the war in the people. As Germans started to associate the date with the ritual of the *Volkstrauertag*, the VDK had constructed an immaterial site of memory.

Unsurprisingly, this choice brought the VDK into conflict with the Churches.⁵¹ For once, neither of the two saw any need for an additional remembrance day next to their own. Even more importantly, the Churches think of Lent as a significant spiritual time for quiet self-communion and reflection. They found it hard to tolerate any heroic and glorious ritual to take place at the same time. However, after much discussion all parties eventually agreed to the second Sunday of Lent, mostly as a result of mounting public pressure to find a date for the *Volkstrauertag*.⁵²

⁴⁸ Note that other Protestant Churches have other holidays that match the date, which, however, have a different meaning. Both the Anglican and the Episcopalian church celebrate 'All Souls Day', but the *Totensonntag* is indeed unique to the German Lutheran Church.

⁴⁹ Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag', 38.

⁵⁰ Siems, 'Begrüßungsworte 1926', 34.

⁵¹ Zilien, 'Der Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V. Während Der Weimarer Republik', 467.

⁵² Kaiser makes this argument in: Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 66–67.

The Sunday *Reminiscere* is part of the preparations for Eastern in the liturgical calendar of the Western Christian Church. In the ecclesiastical understanding the motive *reminiscere*, Latin for ‘commemorate’ (imperative), reminds the believer to commemorate God’s mercy. The VDK could easily capitalise on the literal translation of the ecclesiastical motive, although it did not adopt the meaning of it. The speakers quickly appropriated the motive for their own purposes: In almost all speeches delivered at the Volkstrauertag after 1926 the speakers demand their audience to *reminiscere* the dead soldiers.⁵³ The Volkstrauertag, therefore, obtained its leitmotif from an appropriation of both natural and ecclesiastical symbolism and linked the date with a revisionist call for national resurrection.

The agreement to conduct the Volkstrauertag on the second Sunday of Lent fuelled the VDK’s wish to institutionalize the Volkstrauertag as a national holiday once again. A nation-wide legal commitment, so they thought, would surely help their claim to conduct a truly national memorial-day. However, the Republic’s constitution only allowed the federal governments to introduce such official holidays, but not the national government.⁵⁴ So their long-held wish never became reality. Notwithstanding, the VDK prided itself with the establishment of a truly national memorial-day. In fact, this claim did not deviate from the truth completely. After all, it was the VDK who invited state officials to participate in the ritual, and not the other way around. As the next section shows, the VDK indeed managed to fashion the Volkstrauertag in a stately manner, and simultaneously impose its Volksbundideologie on the ritual.

The Reichstag as a temporary site of ritual

From 1925 onwards the VDK benefitted from a change in government that improved acceptance of the Volkstrauertag as the one official memorial-day on side of conservative Germans. In that year’s election the German electorate voted the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (DNVP) into parliament, a major nationalist and

⁵³ As a prime example of the use of the leitmotif ‘*reminiscere*’, see: Benedict Kreutz, ‘Gedenkrede des Präsidenten des Deutschen Caritasverbandes, Prälat Monsignore Dr. Kreutz, Freiburg i. Br., in der Gedenkfeier im Reichstag am Volkstrauertag 1928’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1928, 60, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

⁵⁴ Peterson wrote an extensive analysis of the history of the Volkstrauertag, including all periods from the Weimar Republic until the unification of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990, from a purely legal perspective. The federalized legal structure of Weimar Germany’s constitution constrained the national government’s abilities to, for instance, force upon the federal states any kind of holiday. See: Peterson, *Die Geschichte des Volkstrauertags*, 20–25.

conservative party made up of an alliance of reactionary monarchists, anti-Semites, and nationalists. The DNVP became a reliable partner to the VDK. Promptly after the election it attempted to make use of its political power by urging the federal governments to institutionalize the Volkstrauertag as a federal holiday.⁵⁵ Severe opposition from side of several federal governments once again buried their hopes. Yet the DNVP succeeded to convince other parliamentarians to host the yearly memorial-day at the *Reichstag*, the national parliament in Berlin. This further adds to the above-named argument, which describes memory politics as a predominantly political endeavour. Between 1925 and 1932 the main ceremony of the Volkstrauertag took place in the plenary hall of the Reichstag, and both parliamentarians and members of the government participated in great numbers.⁵⁶

The ritual of the Volkstrauertag surely profited from the grandeur of the room. As *figure 1* shows, long black curtains encased the plenary hall and stimulated an impressive atmosphere. The arrangement is reminiscent of a mourning band and reflects the traditional symbolic language of German memorial culture. These elements draw on the large storage of material symbolism accumulated by German society in the past.⁵⁷

Yet certain elements clearly contribute to the unique character of the Volkstrauertag. First, at the back wall two colossal silver wreaths framed the centralized emblem of the VDK, five white crosses against a black backdrop. The central position of the VDK's emblem visualises, once again, the dominance of the Volksbundideologie in shaping *its* memorial-day.⁵⁸ Second, from 1927 onwards the VDK invited a guard of honour that positioned itself in a compact formation behind the lectern, carrying the old standards of Berlin's former regiments.⁵⁹ The attendance of soldiers in uniforms and steel helmets imposed a palpable militaristic posture on the ritual. The style remained

⁵⁵ Minister of the interior Martin Schiele (DNVP) was responsible for this attempt, as it is described in: Siegfried Emmo Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag 1924', *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, May 1924, 11, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

⁵⁶ For a description of the participants in 1925, 1926, and 1927, see: Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag 1925', April 1925, 42; Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag 1926', 50; Siegfried Emmo Eulen, 'Unser diesjähriger Volkstrauertag 1927', *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1927, 50, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

⁵⁷ Michael Jeismann and Rolf Westheider, 'Wofür Stirbt Der Bürger? Nationaler Totenkult Und Staatsbürgertum in Deutschland Und Frankreich Seit Der Französischen Revolution', in *Der Politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in Der Moderne*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann, Bild Und Text (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994), 27–29.

⁵⁸ The VDK's emblem carries strong Christian connotations. Its five white crosses against the black backdrop are reminiscent of German Christian mourning culture more generally; a reason for why it fits the Volkstrauertag's outlook as a mournful remembrance day quite well. Yet, the emblem is still distinct and represents the VDK as an organisation.

⁵⁹ Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag 1927', 51.

similar over the years. From then on, no observer could longer interpret it as a ritual solely dedicated to mourning the dead.



Figure 1. The Volkstrauertag celebrations in the Reichstag in 1929.⁶⁰

In the previous year the VDK had already summoned nationalist fraternities to participate. Their members dressed in full regalia and usually stood next to the guard of honour. These elements added further to the definite nationalistic and militaristic symbolic language of the Volkstrauertag. The VDK had turned the plenary hall of the Reichstag into a temporary *lieu-de-mémoire* (site of memory).⁶¹

Moreover, the venue itself also held an important symbolic message. As the very stage where the political representatives of *all* German people summon, it lent some weight to the VDK's claim to organize a *national* memorial-day. Executing its ritual in

⁶⁰ Georg Pahl, *Die Grosse Gedenkfeier Am Volkstrauertag Im Plenarsitzungssaal Des Reichstages in Berlin*, February 1929, Photograph, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.

⁶¹ According to French historian Pierre Nora, "a lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community". Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 4.

a venue reminiscent of signs of state sovereignty, with actual office-bearers of that sovereignty participating, the VDK could easily lay claim on its interpretation of the past as the authorities one. As a result, the VDK was the only political memory actor in Weimar Germany that came close to establishing its own consolidated ritual, with a clear set of practices and invested meanings, that also looked similar to a state ritual. All elements, the chosen form (memorial-day), date (spring/resurrection/reminiscere), place (plenary hall of the Reichstag) and the physical appearance of the Volkstrauertag clearly served as tools to further their conservative political agenda in form of the Volksbundideologie.

Chapter Two.

The rhetoric of the Volkstrauertag: idealising the war as a time of unity and heroic sacrifice

In the previous chapter it has become clear from which social stratum the VDK drew its members, what core elements their common ideology consisted of and how these found expression in the outlook of the temporary site of ritual. The keynote addresses, which the speakers delivered after the first musical performances had come to an end, were another core tool to communicate memory. The temporary site of the ritual carried nationalistic and militaristic symbolism, and this chapter similarly probes the speeches for their (symbolic) images. It also asks how the VDK employed these images to spread its political ideology in an attempt to reign supreme over the various interpretations of the past prevalent in Weimar Germany's contested platform of war memory. This chapter maintains that the rhetoric of the speeches exemplifies the VDK's ideology in form of two (political) myths that, first and foremost, idealize the war experience of Germans and soldiers alike as a time of unity. Hence the politicisation of the war memory finds expression in the speeches as well, which are one crucial element of this institution of memory.

One central medium memory actors employ to shape the past are political myths.⁶² These political myths occur in the speeches delivered at the Volkstrauertag as stories that reduce historical events to mythic archetypes. That means, the memory actors purposefully transformed the historical events by altering their concrete conditions of occurrence and adorning them with persuasive and affective elements instead. Take, for instance, how in 1930 the secretary of the VDK describes the political landscape: "Night has befallen Germany. Today, altercations and quarrels are governing us."⁶³ Eulen then goes on to juxtapose this conflict-ridden society with a mythic unity as it, according to him, existed during the war: "There was a time in German history when all Germans were unconditionally unified. We were united in our common love for the fatherland and we gave everything for it."⁶⁴ In this example Eulen deliberately adorns an event from the past, namely the war, with

⁶² Myths are the principal media by which political memory is carried. See: Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 25–28.

⁶³ Siegfried Emmo Eulen, 'Gedenkrede des 1. Schriftführers des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Dr. Eulen, in der Gedenkfeier des Volksbundes im Reichstag am Volkstrauertag 1931', *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1931, 52, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

⁶⁴ Eulen, 52.

specific affective elements, such as feelings of communality and shared sacrifices. Eulen consciously misrepresents what the war must have felt like for many people involved in it.

Political myths certainly falsify history if necessary. We should not, however, understand political myths primarily as a “falsification of historical reality”.⁶⁵ Instead, to historians it is much more interesting that political myths put history to use for contemporary constructions of identity. It is the “affective appropriation of history” that makes political myths so expressive. The very appropriation involved allows for an insight into the intentions of the historical actor.⁶⁶ Eulen, for instance, represents the war as a time of unity. He appropriates the past to present to his contemporaries an interpretation of the war they can identify with more comfortably. It follows that political myths frame the past through the lens of identity by adorning it with affective elements, and hence “denote the affective appropriation of one’s own history”.⁶⁷ This function makes them meaningful as present modes of relating to history and constructing an identity in the process. This shows that we should think of political myths not solely as falsifications of the past, simply because the modes of relating to history in such way are themselves *historical facts*. It is precisely these historical facts this section scrutinizes.

Prior to this, it is important to note that myths about the past contain of a threefold categorisation according to themes, functions, and demands. This has to do with the temporalities that underlie any narration of the past.⁶⁸ Memory politics, for instance, recounts the past in form of a symbol (theme) that explains or makes sense of the present (function), and also makes the past a model for the present (demand).⁶⁹ This becomes clear in the following analysis because it shows how the two political myths served as a counter-image to the present. For that very reason, the analysis of the *myth of the unity of the Volk* and the *myth of comradeship* is structured in replicate of this order. All sections discuss the political myths’ integrative themes, functions, and inherent demands and abstract from them the rhetoric of the ‘memory of the Volkstrauertag’. *Table 1* at the end of the second section of this chapter visualises the above-named categorisation.

⁶⁵ Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 26.

⁶⁶ Assmann, 26.

⁶⁷ Assmann, 26.

⁶⁸ Feuchtwang, ‘Ritual and Memory’, 286.

⁶⁹ For a description of the temporality of political myths, see: Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 27.

The myth of the unity of the Volk

It is vital to understand that both political myths are grounded in the all-encompassing *ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft*.⁷⁰ The ideal represents German society as a true community, bound by a common national identity that is charged with values like the readiness to make sacrifices, loyalty, and heroism. This ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft was first articulated by what historian Jeffrey Verhey calls the “spirit of 1914”.⁷¹ Initially, the spirit of 1914 designated a great collective enthusiasm about the war that was allegedly shared by all Germans in the summer of 1914. Media and propaganda quickly turned this collective experience of community and fraternity into a mythical ideal. According to them, this collective experience actually was nothing short of spiritual unification. It represents, so they claimed, the final stage of German unification after hundreds of years of political fragmentation. In fact, only some parts of German society joined in the war enthusiasm – and if they did it lasted only for a very brief time. Nevertheless, political leaders, journalists, and intellectuals were quick to evoke the sensation of a Volksgemeinschaft of the now mythical war enthusiasm of 1914. And so the spirit of 1914 turned into a catalyst for the ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft.⁷² The VDK recycled this ideal into the two myths it used to frame its own memory of the war.

The first political myth the speakers repeatedly employed is the *myth of the unity of the Volk*. It imagines the war as a time of unity and solidarity among Germans. In 1931 Eulen quite explicitly suggests that “we [the Volk] ostracized any dissension in the face of death”.⁷³ A few years earlier VDK president Fritz Siems had forwarded a similar claim, when in 1924 he remembered that “in this time of hardship we Germans stood together as a united people. We were united in our common purpose: Germany, Germany above all, above all else in the world!”⁷⁴ The speakers repeatedly generalise about the values and emotions the German

⁷⁰ The term ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ has various translations. The ‘community of the people’ probably comes closest to its meaning; the German word ‘Volk’ refers to the populace of a nation, but it encapsulates more than just civic nationhood. Therefore, the Volksgemeinschaft is more than just a ‘national community’. The understanding of the Volk as a community of people rests heavily on the implicit connotation that culture and language are the unifying principles of that people. Other than in England or France the German lands remained fragmented without a centralized authority until the late nineteenth century. From this emerged a more culturally based definition of national affiliation. This version of ethnic-nationalism (‘Völkischer Nationalismus’ in German) was quite popular among all social groups in Weimar Germany.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–10.

⁷² Verhey, 240.

⁷³ Eulen, ‘Gedenkrede 1931’, 52.

⁷⁴ Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1926’, March 1926, 35; ‘Germany, Germany above all, above all else in the world’ is the first line of the first stanza of the ‘Deutschlandlied’, the official German anthem since 1922, written in 1841 by August Heinrich Hoffman von Fallersleben. After World War Two the first and second stanza were omitted. ‘Germany above all’ originally referred to the liberal struggle for

people, soldiers and those at home alike, had apparently shared during the war. Siems recalls “a selfless love for the fatherland, German braveness and German strength, patriotic loyalty, a deep trust in God and in us” among *all* Germans.⁷⁵ This idealistic representation of an unconditional solidarity and unity had been around at least since the beginning of the war. For instance, the trope of the ‘Burgfrieden’ (truce) echoes the same idealistic representation of the war. This myth was prevalent already since the early days of the war in the symbolic politics of the Emperor.⁷⁶ The speakers refer to it frequently. The Burgfrieden must have been a familiar trope for them that epitomises the same values as of the myth of the unity of the Volk.

Initially, the ‘Burgfrieden’ described the pragmatic agreement among all political parties in Germany to defer any domestic political conflicts over the course of World War One. The famous dictum by Emperor Wilhelm II, “I know no parties anymore, only Germans!“, exemplifies this attempt to unify all Germans in the name of national defence at the outset of the war.⁷⁷ However, the Burgfrieden quickly deteriorated when the economic situation in Germany aggravated and the horrors of the trench warfare disillusioned many parliamentarians.

Yet the myth of the Burgfrieden was there to stay. First, during the war the military

national unity in the nineteenth century but became associated with the attempt by the Nazi dictatorship to subjugate nearly all European states. However, as Buchner has shown, especially the anti-republican right embraced the first stanza in Weimar Germany already. After the First World War president Friedrich Ebert declared the Deutschlandlied to be the official hymn, mostly due to the third stanza, today again Germany’s official hymn, that praises ‘unity, justice, and freedom’. Hence, at the time referring to the first stanza like Siems did was also a political statement. In: Bernd Buchner, *Um Nationale Und Republikanische Identität: Die Deutsche Sozialdemokratie Und Der Kampf Um Die Politischen Symbole in Der Weimarer Republik*, Reihe Politik- Und Gesellschaftsgeschichte 57 (Bonn: Dietz, 2001), 17–25.

⁷⁵ Fritz Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte des Präsidenten des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Pfarrer Siems, Charlottenburg, in der Gedenkfeier im Reichstag am Volkstrauertag 1928’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1928, 60, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel; Fatherland is a literal translation of the German term ‘Vaterland’. This term features prominently in all speeches. I employ the literal translation because alternative terms such as ‘nation’ (‘Nation’ in German) do not share its’ implicit connotations. Although in the speeches the German term ‘Nation’ is often employed interchangeably with ‘Vaterland’, the English term nation does not carry the uniquely German connotation implicit in Fatherland. Fatherland signifies a particularly sentimental kind of patriotism, one that is not necessarily associated with the nation. Moreover, the usage of the term Fatherland has markedly declined over the past century and can therefore be more easily associated with earlier periods of German history.

⁷⁶ For a concise analysis of the emergence, function, and mythologization of the Burgfrieden, see: Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 17–24; For a precise analysis of the peace movement and the socialist party in Germany, see: Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World without War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁷⁷ As quoted in: Michael Balfour, *The Kaiser and His Times*, The Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1972), 159.

leadership under Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg turned it into a propaganda tool to boost morale at the front and at home.⁷⁸ In later years it gained widespread popularity in Weimar's memory of the war.⁷⁹ In 1924 Fritz Siems closely echoes Emperor Wilhelm's dictum, for example, by evocating the soldiers' unity in death: "In thousands of graves they lie without any differences in religion, political parties, education, or age. Because there was only one thing that mattered to them: They were Germans!"⁸⁰ The speakers at the Volkstrauertag were therefore complicit in the prolongation of the myth of the Burgfrieden, which served the same function then and in Weimar Germany: to idealize the war experience as a time of unity. The myth of the Burgfrieden is a trope that carries the same idealized values as the myth of the unity of the Volk.

To idealize the war as a time of unity of the Volksgemeinschaft helped to construct an identity. The function of the rhetoric was to retroactively attach meaning to an otherwise negative and even meaningless experience. As an example, take the semantic differentiation that explains how people, depending on whether they lost or won the war, may frame their memory of the dead.⁸¹ There are two interpretational frameworks that retroactively frame the soldier's death as either meaningful or meaningless. First, *sacrificium* denotes an active, heroic and meaningful death. Victors can use this frame to give meaning to the death of their soldiers. In England and France, for instance, the dead were remembered with pride; they had defended the nation and brought triumph, their death was therefore meaningful.⁸² *Victima*, on the other hand, denotes a rather passive, innocent and most importantly meaningless death. Especially in a culture of nationalism the defeat in war triggers a bitter sense of humiliation, according to Wolfgang Schivelbusch. He notes that in modernity:

[W]ar and defeat took on the dimensions of a social Darwinist struggle for *national* survival. With war imagined as battle of life and death, not only between armies but between entire populations, defeat became tantamount to the nation's death agony.⁸³

⁷⁸ Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 22.

⁷⁹ Krumeich, 24.

⁸⁰ Siems, 'Begrüßungsworte 1926'.

⁸¹ Kaiser uses this valuable semantic differentiation in her introduction in order to make a distinction between the essence of the character of the respective nation's culture of remembrance. See: Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 21.

⁸² Briefly after the war already, both France and Britain managed to construct an integrative national memory of the war. The death of their soldiers could easily be understood as meaningful, since they brought about victory. See: Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 227.

⁸³ Italics mine. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (London: Granta, 2003), 6.

The very fact that the army missed its main goal, namely to win the war, but instead suffered defeat automatically turned the dead German soldiers into victims. In psychological (and metaphorical) terms, defeat pushes a void in the national psyche which before was filled with honour and the belief in victory. Many Germans therefore experienced the loss of millions of “fathers, brothers, and husbands”,⁸⁴ the ultimate defeat in war, and the subsequent humiliation at Versailles, as meaningless and in vain. The speakers meant to fill this void by idealizing the war. In their use of rhetorical tropes that imagine the war as a time of unity they offer a more meaningful model to identify with than the one-dimensional story of the unavailing death that defeat had brought. Germans could now think of the war as a time of shared communalities when imagining the war as a time of unity. By means of this rhetorical trick the speakers retroactively attached positive and constructive meaning to an otherwise merely negative experience.

At the same time, the idealization of the war as a time of unity symbolises a break with the past. It juxtaposes an idealized past condition with a present that lacks the very ideal. To the VDK the memory of the dead soldiers served as “the only symbol of unity there is left”, because “in the present we lack any common beliefs while quarrels and disputes govern our lives”.⁸⁵ In this image the past is constructed as a time during which the Volk was unified in patriotism and a readiness to make sacrifices for the fatherland. The present is then juxtaposed: “German unity was lost at the hands of political clamour”.⁸⁶ In this depiction the present is in dire need of such war-time values.⁸⁷ This image, hence, allows for an implicit delegitimization of the current political order.⁸⁸ It serves as a contra-image to the present.

⁸⁴ Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1926’.

⁸⁵ Eulen, ‘Gedenkrede 1931’, 52.

⁸⁶ Eulen, ‘Volkstrauertag 1924’, 11.

⁸⁷ After praising war-time values such as heroism and sacrifice, inter alia, Geßler claims that these are values ‘the fatherland is in dire need of today’. See: Otto Geßler, ‘Ansprache des Präsidenten des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, e.D., Reichsministers a. D. Dr. Geßler, am Volkstrauertag 1929 im Plenarsitzungssaal des Reichstages’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1929, 51, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

⁸⁸ Any reader intimate with German history might have already thought of the most infamous of all post-war political myths, namely the stab-in-the-back myth. This myth was widely circulated in and by right-wing groups in the Weimar Republic. They used it to delegitimize the democratic republic. It portrays the defeat in war as not a military one, but as a betrayal of the army by the home-front and especially the revolutionaries who overthrew the Hohenzollern monarchy and thereby ended the war. This myth, however, is significantly different from the two this thesis focuses on. Albeit all three reject the Republic as either a project of (communist) revolutionaries (stab-in-the-back-myth), or as an inherently disrupted political system void of unity (myth of the unity of the Volk; myth of comradeship), and all make some statement about the role of the defeat for the Republic’s birth, the former is solely an interpretation of how the war was actually lost. The speakers, however, refrained from stating any opinion about the specific circumstances of the defeat and hence made no use of the stab-in-the-back myth. The latter two myths discuss the defeat too, yet without giving any explanation of how it exactly happened. For a meticulous account of the stab-in-the-back myth and its role in the political culture of Weimar Germany, see: Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 183–208.

Democracy is depicted in the negative through repeated references to its conflicted nature, its inability to create consensus for everyone or the vulnerability of its coalition governments.⁸⁹ In the above-mentioned example Fritz Siems holds “political clamour” to be responsible for the loss of unity.⁹⁰ Other speakers juxtapose the current dysfunctional (democratic) system with an idealized war during which “faithful obedience” and “unconditional loyalty” sustained the war effort.⁹¹ These values are the reverse poles to democratic principles like independent participation and codetermination. This example shows how the image of the war, in which blind loyalty generates unity, denotes an innately anti-democratic standpoint.

All in all, the majority of the speakers considered unity to be the ideal state of the Volk. The political realities of their times, however, stood in stark contrast to that ideal. Already during the war, the ‘Burgfrieden’ had quickly deteriorated as party interests and the stagnation of the war increased conflicts among the parliamentary parties. And an unambiguous support for the war by the population was probably always a phantasma.⁹² Even if the Burgfrieden created a reciprocal fixation on the war that existed for a while, it ultimately broke down with the military capitulation in November 1918. This allowed political actors to redirect their focus from the outside onto the domestic political landscape. By that time, all the serious antagonisms existent in Weimar’s political scene became ever more apparent. The myth of the unity of the Volk sought to revive that unity at least allegorically. The memory actors involved with the Volkstrauertag used it as a counter-image to contemporary political conflicts.

This act is therefore in essence a political act.⁹³ As their present is lacking such unity, the speakers draw the now obvious conclusion that it has to be regained. This, so they claimed, can only be done by means of a joint remembrance of the soldiers’ sacrifice to the fatherland, the only symbol of unity there is left. In 1929 speaker Benedict Kreutz appeals to the audience: “Reminiscere! [reminisce]”⁹⁴ Almost all successive speakers repeated this demand in their speeches. And although the demand seems obvious at a memorial-day there is more to it. The speakers articulated the hope that by means of participating in the shared ritual

⁸⁹ Erich Schlegel, ‘Opfer und Vaterland (1932)’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, March 1932, 37, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel; Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1928’, 60; Kahl, ‘Gedenkrede 1930’, 55.

⁹⁰ Eulen, ‘Volkstrauertag 1924’, 11.

⁹¹ Geßler, ‘Ansprache 1929’, 51.

⁹² Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914*, 10–11.

⁹³ Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*, 222.

⁹⁴ Kreutz, ‘Gedenkrede 1928’, 59. Reminiscere is Latin for ‘commemorate’ (imperative). It is the motive of the second Sunday in Lent, the beginning of the preparations for Eastern in the liturgical calendar of the Western Christian Church. From 1926 onwards the Volkstrauertag was always celebrated on this date until 1938. The date was consciously chosen for its symbolic meaning. See chapter one of this thesis.

of the Volkstrauertag people will mediate over such an “untouchable and indestructible sanctum of German unity”, that is, the symbol of the dead soldiers.⁹⁵ Thereby they will end the “conflicts of domestic politics” and create a community of remembrance.⁹⁶ Wilhelm Karl, parliamentarian and speaker at the Volkstrauertag in 1930 went so far as to claim that “this commemoration of the dead belongs to all Germans”.⁹⁷ The Volkstrauertag is thus invoked as a “memorial-day that is blind to denominational divisions”, hence a symbol of unity in times of discordance.⁹⁸

The rhetorical unification of the Volk additionally fulfilled another hope many nationalists in Weimar Germany shared. To unify the Volk, they believed, is the central precondition to the resurrection of the German nation after the humiliation of the defeat in the Great War.⁹⁹ The hope for national resurrection, as shown above, is also present in the VDK’s choice for the particular date in spring, on the Sunday of Reminiscere. This demand for national resurrection likely resounded well with the audience. National resurrection seemed quite pressing to many nationalists given the harsh peace conditions the Entente Powers had forced the Reich to accept. A large majority of Germans considered them unjustified.¹⁰⁰ This and the lively memory of military defeat were two humiliations that triggered a desire among some Germans to regain national strength, to “take back our rightful place among the world’s nations”.¹⁰¹ The historian and expert on cultural memory-studies Aleida Assmann sees such imperative future-oriented action demands as typical characteristic of the memory culture of defeated nations.¹⁰² Victors remember the triumph, which eventually becomes a past event. But the focus of those defeated is geared towards the future instead. The demand

⁹⁵ Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1926’, 34.

⁹⁶ Siems, 34.

⁹⁷ Kahl, ‘Gedenkrede 1930’, 54.

⁹⁸ Kahl, 54.

⁹⁹ Krumeich holds the military defeat as responsible for a culture of hate that took hold in the early days of Weimar. The defeat also instilled deep hopes for retaliation, that could only become reality through a resurrection of the nation. Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 230; For explicit evocations of the need for national resurrection, see, inter alia: Kahl, ‘Gedenkrede 1930’, 54; Schlegel, ‘Opfer und Vaterland (1932)’, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Krieg im Frieden: die unkämpfte Erinnerung an den Ersten Weltkrieg; Quellen und Dokumente*, 1., Fischer Geschichte 13277 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1997), 21; Especially the question of who was responsible for the outbreak of the war was a very sensitive issue during the peace talks at Versailles. In the end Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles, by which it accepted the full responsibility for the outbreak of the war and thus had to bear all costs the war had inflicted upon the part-taking states. The “Kriegschuldfrage”, as it came to be known in Germany, developed into such a dominant topic in Weimar’s political cultures that today some see it as prime factor for triggering a deep desire for revenge, which the national-socialist most successfully capitalized on. See: Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 230–46.

¹⁰¹ Schlegel, ‘Opfer und Vaterland (1932)’, 37.

¹⁰² Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 47.

‘Reminiscere’ served as a catalyst that gave meaning to the past, explained the present in opposition to the past, and therefore demanded to shape the future.

The myth of comradeship

As shown above, analogies that relate the themes of unity and death frequently recur in the speeches.¹⁰³ Unsurprisingly then, the second myth equally elicits such an imperturbable unity. It is similarly grounded in the leitmotif of the unity of the Volk. But its’ theme is a different one as the focus here is solely on the theatre of war itself. The *myth of comradeship* portrays the community of the soldiers as a unified and heroic band of brothers. It additionally depicts the condition of war as a drastic experience of a constant peril of death and destiny, in which absolute loyalty and the readiness to sacrifice guided the soldiers’ actions. These values are also part of the more general ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft, discussed above. The symbol of the myth of comradeship functions as another evocation of that ideal. Quite similar to the myth of the unity of the Volk, the myth of comradeship works as a function to attach meaning to the death of the soldiers. It also represents an idealization of the war, as symbolized in the narrative of the soldier’s heroic sacrifice to die in defence of the fatherland. Once again, the myth implicitly demands from the Germans to remember the dead soldiers (‘Reminiscere!’) and to re-build what they so bravely defended.

The myth of comradeship served the speakers at the Volkstrauertag well to paint a rosy and glorified picture of the war experience. Speakers began to employ it regularly from the mid nineteen-twenties onwards.¹⁰⁴ Somewhat predictably, the theme of ‘unity’ plays a significant role here too. The rhetorical trope used in this myth is the image of the ‘unity in the grave’. Numerous times the speakers refer to the common belief for which the soldiers died and that they now lie next to each other regardless of “religion or confession, party or class”.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, some speakers vividly describe the many thousands of white crosses that were erected on war graves all over the world, which also embody an image of equality in death. Regardless of rank and positions of the soldier all crosses look the same.¹⁰⁶ The soldiers formed a “band of brothers” ignorant of class or religious differences.¹⁰⁷ In this we

¹⁰³ Paul Löbe, ‘Unseren Gefallenen Helden zum Gedächtnis. Die Feier im Reichstage 1922’, *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, March 1922, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge Kassel; Kahl, ‘Gedenkrede 1930’; Schlegel, ‘Opfer und Vaterland (1932)’.

¹⁰⁴ From 1926 onwards, every speaker employs the myth of comradeship at least once in his speech. See: Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1926’; Kreutz, ‘Gedenkrede 1928’; Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1928’; Kahl, ‘Gedenkrede 1930’; Eulen, ‘Gedenkrede 1931’; Schlegel, ‘Opfer und Vaterland (1932)’.

¹⁰⁵ Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1926’, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Löbe, ‘Unseren Gefallenen Helden zum Gedächtnis. Die Feier im Reichstage’, *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 6 March 1922; Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1926’, 34; Kahl, ‘Gedenkrede 1930’, 55.

¹⁰⁷ Kreutz, ‘Gedenkrede 1928’, 60.

once again see the ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft shimmering through. But there is more to say about the myth's popularity among the keynote speakers. Arguably, its attractiveness originated also from its power to turn a generally cruel experience into a glorious one. Hence the myth of comradeship is a portrayal of strong communal bounds but also of great individual heroism.

According to Assmann, turning a cruel experience into a glorious one constitutes another core characteristic of the what she calls the *memory of the defeated*.¹⁰⁸ For the overpowered Germans, their loss of honour stood at the centre of the humiliation. It destroyed both their individual and collective self-image as honourable and victorious fighters. Consequently, they desired a restoration of that very honour, which required to reframe the war from an experience of disgrace into one of heroism.¹⁰⁹ Take, for instance, the characteristics which speaker Benedict Kreutz attributes to the war experience in 1928. The soldiers were fulfilled, he claimed, by an “unconditional love for their fatherland, by German bravery and German strength, a profound loyalty and holy confidence”.¹¹⁰ Hence, they died “willingly and without remorse”.¹¹¹ In this image of the myth of comradeship the war is no longer an absurd experience but rather a meaningful one. Ever more so because through this prism the soldiers had experienced heroic deeds and events as a community, a band of brothers, a Volk.

The myth of comradeship also declares *all* soldiers to be heroes. This strengthens the attempted restoration of the soldiers' honour. In 1928 Fritz Siems asserted that the soldiers “not only suffered like martyrs, but died like heroes”.¹¹² The death of the martyr resembles one of the Christian analogies that figure numerous in the speeches of the Volkstrauertag. Jan-Hendrik Meyer therefore phrased this ritualistic evocation of the soldiers' heroism a *secularised religion*.¹¹³ In the heroic image, every single soldier is a martyr. They all died for either their belief in the German victory or the German fatherland.¹¹⁴ To highlight this point, see how in 1930 Wilhelm Karl, who himself never fought in the war, went as far as attesting

¹⁰⁸ As noted above, Assmann differentiates between the memory of victors and the memory of the defeated. Additionally, she distinguishes between the memory of victims and the memory of perpetrators. These different forms of national memory cultures consist of unique characteristics that allow to employ them as analytical tools. See: Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 46–51.

¹⁰⁹ Assmann, 49.

¹¹⁰ Kreutz, ‘Gedenkrede 1928’, 60.

¹¹¹ Kreutz, 60.

¹¹² Siems, ‘Begrüßungsworte 1926’, 59.

¹¹³ Meyer, ‘Die Reden Auf Den Zentralen Veranstaltungen Zum Volkstrauertag Bzw. Zum Heldengedenktage 1922-1989’, 63.

¹¹⁴ All speakers unanimously refer to the soldiers as ‘heroes’. This began already in 1922 - the title of Paul Löbe's speech stands programmatical for this image of the soldiers as heroes: “To the memory of our fallen heroes”. See: Löbe, ‘Unseren Gefallenen Helden zum Gedächtnis. Die Feier im Reichstage’.

the soldiers a sort of spiritual fulfilling while they died at the front: “Happy were those who could die on the battlefield, fulfilled by their unyielding belief in German victory.”¹¹⁵ Yet they are clearly secular not religious martyrs, as they died for a nationalist cause. Traditionally the designation *hero* ascribes heroic deeds to a single person rather than to a collective. This transfer to include them all dignified all dead soldiers retroactively as heroes and therefore gave meaning to the otherwise absurd experience of the war.¹¹⁶

Moreover, the death of a martyr is not the same as the death of a simple victim. By identifying their death as a sacrifice, the image elevates the death of the soldiers. Martyrdom carried at least two meanings in early twentieth-century Germany. First, it referred more generally to the endurance of harsh pain or even death for the sake of one’s strong beliefs. In the religious sense it stood for the Passion of Jesus Christ. The Passion epitomises both Jesus’ suffering on behalf of the many and for renewal, as symbolised in his resurrection.¹¹⁷ Hence, the soldiers were not simply poor victims who died for a lost cause, but rather heroes who gave their life as a sacrifice for a good and honourable cause, for the many and for the fatherland. This image allows the defeated (now the heroic loser) to appeal to the satisfaction of having fought bravely and honourably, if hopelessly, to the bitter end.¹¹⁸ The imagery of martyrdom and sacrifice permits the losing side to attain a dignity that was lost through defeat. The following example shows this. In 1932 Erich Schlegel, president of the VDK at the time, contemplated the meaning of the death of all those soldiers:

Life is perfected by sacrifice. Therefore, there must have been a higher merit in the great toll of lives paid by our soldiers. If everything around them seemed as if life was nothing but a sad swindle, they must have had a glorious ideal for which they felt it was worth dying. From countless testaments that are sealed with blood we can tell today: this higher ideal was our common fatherland ... They all followed this one truth: Germany must live, even if we must die.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Kahl, ‘Gedenkrede 1930’, 55.

¹¹⁶ Cultural historian Reinhart Koselleck calls this an “authentic case of secularisation” that is part of a general transformation in the political death cult in modernity. The Christian hope to save every soul in the kingdom come is replaced with the responsibility of a political community to remember every hero. Their violent death is already justified in itself if it helps to maintain the survival of the community; through the act of remembering, their souls are redeemed in the here and now. Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann, eds., *Der Politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in Der Moderne, Bild Und Text* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994), 14.

¹¹⁷ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his pathbreaking study of national cultures of defeat, argues that the identification with the Passion of Christ is an elementary characteristic of defeated (and predominantly Christian) nations. It serves as a metaphor for their instinctive desire for national renewal. See: Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*, 30.

¹¹⁸ Schivelbusch, 17.

¹¹⁹ Schlegel, ‘Opfer und Vaterland (1932)’, 55.

Schlegel merged the various themes discussed above. The speech really epitomises the myth of comradeship as it comprises the three themes heroism, martyrdom, and sacrifice. As shown, the myth suggests that against all odds the German soldiers remained loyal to their fatherland and sacrificed themselves as heroic martyrs for the sake of the survival of the fatherland. The traits sacrifice and heroism are similarly emblematic to the ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft that represents the foundation for both the myth of comradeship and the myth of the unity of the Volk.¹²⁰

The myth of comradeship, therefore, idealises the war experience as a heroic sacrifice on the nation's behalf. The sacrifice stands symbolically for the unity of the German people. The trick is such that the speakers never explicitly refer to the conditions of war, but rather circumscribe the actual experience allegorically with symbolic tropes that stand emblematically for the experience. Often, they employ the figure of the unity in the grave to characterize comradeship as heroic, loyal, equal, and determinate.¹²¹ What they neglect is the full reality of the soldiers' death. There is not one description of the cruel conditions of the Great War's trench-warfare, and it also does not leave any room for feelings of despair or unheroic actions that must have characterised their experience as well.

However, there is a strategy to it. By replacing the former aim of the military conflict, namely to win the war, with the more modest aim to defend the fatherland, the death of soldiers can regain meaning.¹²² It is stated above that in times of a virulent nationalism the defeat in war – where war becomes equated with the very survival of the nation – results in the loss of honour of, and consequently humiliates the inferior nation.¹²³ By means of a re-interpretation of the events *ex post facto*, the speakers can reverse this loss of honour and attach new meaning to the death of the soldiers. Hence the myth of comradeship attaches meaning to the soldiers' death while it also creates an identity for those remembering them. The war can be remembered as a time during which all these husbands, brothers, and fathers died dedicated to the cause to defend the fatherland, in which they eventually succeeded.

On this account the soldiers are directly responsible for the prolonged existence of the German nation. From their sacrifice originates the responsibility of those alive to 'Reminiscere'. In 1928 Kreutz claimed that "the dead, in their unconditional love for the

¹²⁰ Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914*, 9–11.

¹²¹ Such 'graves of comrades' became memorials *sui generis* after World War One. The sheer amounts of dead bodies produced by technological warfare and buried in mass graves necessitated a more anonymous form of commemoration. Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann, eds., *Der Politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in Der Moderne*, Bild Und Text (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994), 15.

¹²² Schlegel, 'Opfer und Vaterland (1932)', 55.

¹²³ Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*, 10.

fatherland and their great sacrifice, have left us an eternal and unforgettable legacy. This band of heroes must be remembered”.¹²⁴ As this quote shows, the speaker evokes a demand. Many of his pre- and successors at the Volkstrauertag did so too. A legacy that derives from a sacrifice requires action from the inherent. The gravity of the legacy usually demands from the inherent to at least honour the sacrifice. The German word *Vermächtnis* (legacy) used in the quote already includes a connotation according to which the next generation has to fulfil a duty it has ‘inherited’; its meaning is actually closer to the English term *bequest*. This implies that the soldiers’ death, by virtue of its sacrifice, automatically passed over a responsibility to those alive to honour them. As noted, memory politics always derives a need for action from the constructed memory of a certain past. Thus, the explicit demand to actively remember “this band of heroes”.¹²⁵ Memory politics is also geared towards the future, especially so when conducted in a defeated nation. The act of remembering is not only a process of mental imagination of past conditions or a ritualistic and therefore symbolic dedication to past conditions, but also a promise to the future.

Moreover, a *sacrifice* denotes a call for action in itself already. A sacrifice is an act on behalf of others by definition. Those who receive the sacrifice are forever in debt. The speakers at the Volkstrauertag therefore consciously evoked this theme, not only as a means to give meaning to an otherwise vain death and to construct an identity for the community of remembrance, but also in order to make a moral argument: the Germans of Weimar Germany owe their dead. Benedict Kreutz made this point very explicitly in his speech in 1928. First, he claimed, the soldiers have “defended German territory and sacrificed themselves for the collective,” and now the “grave of the soldier is the soldier’s legacy”.¹²⁶ Next, he asserted, the Germans are consequently “forever bound to the dead by blood and the love for the fatherland”, from which he concluded a responsibility to honour the dead through “future retaliation” to “defend German honour and the German heritage”.¹²⁷ Revenge and retaliation form the bedrock of the speakers demand for any future actions. Although they never explicitly frame such demands as calls for military acts of retribution, however, the political implication of such calls can hardly be misinterpreted.

¹²⁴ Kreutz, ‘Gedenkrede 1928’, 60.

¹²⁵ Kreutz, 60.

¹²⁶ Kreutz, 60.

¹²⁷ Kreutz, 60–61.

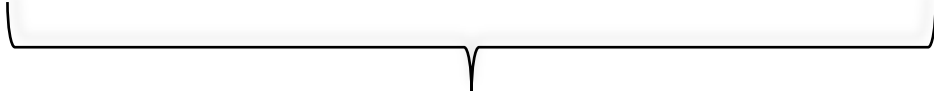
Ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft (as present in the ‘spirit of 1914’) informs		
	⇓	⇓
The myths ⇒	Myth of the unity of the Volk	Myth of comradeship
Their internal structure ⇓		
Themes:	-Unity among all Germans during the war -Burgfrieden (political truce)	-(Comm)unity among soldiers (unity in the grave) -Heroism and Martyrdom
Functions:	-Idealisation of war -Identity construction: gives meaning to absurd experience of war -Delegitimization of current political order (democracy)	-Idealisation of war -Identity construction: gives meaning to absurd experience of war -Gives meaning to death of soldiers
Demands:	Reminiscere → national unification → national resurrection	Reminiscere → national unification → national resurrection
 <p>Memory of war within rhetoric of Volkstrauertag = Conservative, militaristic, nationalistic, vengeful</p>		

Table 1. The two myths present in the rhetoric of the Volkstrauertag

The exception to the rule

Paul Löbe’s (SPD) speech from the first Volkstrauertag in 1922 is, thematically speaking, the exception to the rule. Similar to his successors Löbe also employed a strong nationalistic rhetoric, but unlike them he embedded it within a thematic frame that became neglected soon thereafter.¹²⁸ His is a call for “reconciliation” amongst the nations, in which he decries the “prejudices” and “hate” that together have caused such “excruciating pain”.¹²⁹ Notwithstanding, he as well praises the “sacrifice” of “our valiant heroes” in protecting the “fatherland” and demonstratively warns all listeners and readers to reminisce their immolation.¹³⁰ But he draws a very different conclusion from this memory of the war. To him self-communion in the brutal memory of the war is the path to future peace; it is an inner

¹²⁸ Paul Löbe, ‘Den Kriegstoten’, *Vorwärts*, 6 March 1922; Löbe, ‘Unseren Gefallenen Helden zum Gedächtnis. Die Feier im Reichstage’; Löbe, ‘Die Feier im Reichstage 1922’.

¹²⁹ Löbe, ‘Den Kriegstoten’.

¹³⁰ Löbe, ‘Die Feier im Reichstage 1922’.

force imperative to overcome “bestiality” and “barbarism”, prejudices he denounces as chiefly responsible for the breakout of the war in 1914.¹³¹ Other than all the succeeding speakers Löbe was not a conservative but a member of the *Socialist Democratic Party* (SPD). Traditionally, except for the Burgfrieden years of 1914 to 1917, large shares of the socialists in Germany were either pacifists or at least opponents of wars, which they believed to be mostly capitalistic enterprises. This explains in part Löbe’s rhetoric of reconciliation instead of retaliation.

The myths that eventually envisioned and called for revenge worked like psychological mechanisms to come to terms with the defeat.¹³² Yet, this function was likely to be successful only among a singular group of German society. To conclude this chapter, the implicit demands for revenge in the two myths are strongly politicised tropes that resounded only within a particular social milieu. Löbe was not alone with his pacifistic and republican interpretation of the legacy of the war. Indeed, many often strongly diverging memory narratives were evident among the populace.¹³³ His speech stands exemplary for the fragmented landscape of remembrance that existed in Weimar Germany.¹³⁴

Speakers at the Volkstrauertag were therefore indeed right in their assertion that the memory of the war was a platform of contestation ruled by political conflict. Yet much alike the other memory actors they also deliberately did not provide the public with an integrative memory proposal for how all Germans could collectively remember the war. As Verhey points out, to evoke the ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* functioned as a metaphor for one’s own political ideology.¹³⁵ The VDK, for instance, used the template of the ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and filled it with a narrative replenished with conservative values and norms. Their favourite theme was that of a German spiritual unification at the outbreak of the war, a sort of coalescence from a (disparate) society into a community.

Apart from Paul Löbe – president of the parliament at the time, who was the only

¹³¹ Löbe, ‘Unseren Gefallenen Helden zum Gedächtnis. Die Feier im Reichstage’.

¹³² Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*, 24.

¹³³ Despite the longstanding dictum in academia and popular debate that ‘Weimar was a republic without republicans’, research from recent decades has demonstrated that indeed republicans were not only existent in Weimar Germany but also vigorously active to defend the Republic. They also shaped a republican version of the memory of the war, which, however, remained also the version of just another group of German society. See: Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*.

¹³⁴ Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 211.

¹³⁵ Verhey also emphasizes the fixation to the present of a such a narrative of the past. Although he does not use the term memory politics (which I above have described as a function that employs past events to further political agendas in the present in order to shape the future) he interprets the function of the ‘spirit of 1914’ quite similarly. “The narrative of the ‘spirit of 1914’” he asserts, “was thus couched in the past and future tense; it was a description of a past experience and a future goal.” As quoted in: Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914*, 235.

social-democrat to speak at the Volkstrauertag in Weimar Germany, and maybe Wilhelm Kahl, a member of the liberal party – all other speakers were evidently socialized in and part of the conservative stratum of German society. Those two deviated notably from the political ideologies of their fellow speakers. Perhaps the VDK granted Löbe the opportunity to speak mostly due to his position as president of the Reichstag. Plus, his rhetoric of reconciliation was certainly more appropriate in the early moments of war commemoration, which were overshadowed by tensions in foreign relations as a result of the peace negotiations at Versailles. The decision to invite Kahl to speak at the Volkstrauertag in 1930 remains somewhat mysterious. On the one hand, as a long-time member of the parliament he enjoyed widespread popularity and was known for his balanced opinions regarding the war.¹³⁶ On the other hand, his rhetoric at the Volkstrauertag was fully in accordance with the nationalistic and vengeful tropes of his fellow speakers, with Löbe remaining the only real exception.

The evocation of the two myths of unity by the majority of the speakers should be read as a political argument that forestalled any achievable consensus for a communal remembrance of the war. To this attest as well that all succeeding speakers persistently ignored Löbe's speech and never referred to it neither explicitly nor thematically. To mark the thematic reorientation towards more conservative themes, the VDK even began to declare the 1925 adaption of the VTT to be "our first Volkstrauertag" and thereby neglected any noticeably different interpretation of the war.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Klaus Achenbach, 'Wilhelm Kahl', in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, ed. Otto zu Stolberg-Wernigerode, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1977), 22, <http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/0001/bsb00016328/images/index.html?fip=193.174.98.30&id=00016328&seite=36>.

¹³⁷ Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag 1925', March 1925.

Chapter Three.

Performances of the Volkstrauertag: instantiating the Volk and imagining the nation

The previous two chapters have outlined the invention of the ritual of the Volkstrauertag as an institution of memory meant to further social-milieus' politics. They demonstrated how the date, the temporary ritualistic site and the rhetoric of the speeches functioned as expressions of a political ideology (Volksbundideologie) and as deliberately constructed tools aimed at winning sovereignty over the interpretation of the past. The following chapter builds on the rhetorical and visual characteristics of the ritual and concludes this argument with a scrutiny of its performative dimension. It asks how it must have felt like, for participants and spectators alike, to be physically present at the ritual. The act of performing the ritual forms the last analytical dimension necessary to conclude the Volkstrauertag in its entirety as an integrative, that is, standardized and repetitive ritual.

This chapter claims that performing the ritual evoked an experience of a collective sensation in the participants, an excitement of being removed into something greater than a single self. In the terminology of the Volksbundideologie this 'thing' greater than an individual is the Volk. Being active agents now, and not just passive recipients of a message, the participants were temporarily taking part in the ritual and feeling a collective experience of becoming one. This instantiation of the ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft is at the heart of the symbolic message of the Volkstrauertag. Finally, with the closing act of the ritual, a military parade, the VDK imagined the German nation as a strong and resurrected nation.¹³⁸

Singing a song: 'Ich hatt' ein Kameraden'

The sequence of the ritual inside the Reichstag was tripartite. After all attendees had entered into the spacious plenary hall, which for the occasion was fully encased in long black curtains, and had sat down, a small orchestra began to play a composition, usually

¹³⁸ Anderson has popularized the famous notion of the 'imagined communities', to which the title hints. He argues that nations are socially constructed realities. Only the advent of mass media made it possible for geographically distanced people to construct a joint national identity and replace former local identities. I maintain that rituals can similarly be employed to construct an image of the nation, albeit only for a significantly smaller share of the overall population. See: Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

a funeral march.¹³⁹ A choral society took over then; they sang a choice of popular folk songs many of the attendees could chant along with. Afterwards, for the second part of the Volkstrauertag a speaker would step on stage and deliver the yearly keynote address.¹⁴⁰ Then, to conclude the speech's musical framing, the choral society performed another folk song. The music certainly augmented the ritual with an intense ceremonial atmosphere, but especially the last performance exaggerated the emotionality that already imbued the room. Throughout the years, as a last activity the whole gathering jointly sang the popular soldier song *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden* (I once had a comrade).

This chapter's focus lies on examining the experience of attending to the Volkstrauertag, but a few remarks on the song's lyrics are still required.¹⁴¹ The three stanzas tell the story of two soldiers' parting, one of whom dies in the second stanza.¹⁴² The song glorifies comradeship and thereby connects a mythical war experience with the myth of the Volksgemeinschaft, hence it relates quite accurately to the ideals the VDK wished to emphasise.¹⁴³ The glorification is obvious in the expressed ideals of military obedience and dutiful acquittal the song praises.¹⁴⁴ Its story centres on the death of the soldier without providing any information on the context of the war, like defeat and victory, and therefore appears as rather a-political.¹⁴⁵ These features certainly aided to the great popularity the song had attained among soldiers and the German public

¹³⁹ The various compositions performed changed throughout the years. The tripartite structure remained the same, however. There are descriptions of the sequence in three of the yearly reports (1927, 1930, 1931), which all claim that the sequence remained the same once established in 1925. As an example, see: Siegfried Emmo Eulen, 'Volkstrauertag 1931', *Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, April 1931, 51, Archive of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Kassel.

¹⁴⁰ 1928 is an exception to the rule; in this year two speakers delivered a speech. See: Kreutz, 'Gedenkrede 1928', 59; Siems, 'Begrüßungsworte 1928', 59–61.

¹⁴¹ See Appendix 1. for both the song's lyrics and an English translation. Translation as found in: 'Ich Hatt' Einen Kameraden', in *Wikipedia*, 18 November 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ich_hatt%27_einen_Kameraden&oldid=869436356.

¹⁴² "A bullet came a-flying, is it my turn or yours? He was swept away"

¹⁴³ Several lines evoke an almost mythical comradeship. First, the narrator remembers how they marched for battle: "I once had a comrade, You will find no better." After the soldier was shot "he lies at my feet, as though he were a part of me". Then, they part for eternity: "I cannot hold onto your hand, you stay in eternal life, my good comrade."

¹⁴⁴ The first stanza expresses military obedience in the last three lines: "The drum called us to battle, He walked by my side, In the same pace and step".

¹⁴⁵ For instance, the reason for them to go to war is simply because "the drum called us to battle".

alike during World War One.¹⁴⁶ The lyrics of the song added significantly to one of the core ideals the VDK wished to display.

As the previous chapter exemplified, the speakers repeatedly evoked a myth of comradeship in which the war experience was glorified *ex post* as a time of heroic unity among the soldiers. The myth manufactures an idealized unity, apparently characteristic for the war experience, where the image of the soldiers' unity is used as a prism to claim such unity existed among all Germans. The function of the lyrics at the Volkstrauertag was therefore twofold: on the one hand it presented the war in a glorified and heroized way, which exemplifies a core ideal of the Volksbundideologie. On the other hand, it allowed all those affected by some kind of (negative) war experience to find meaning for their suffering in the a-political and de-contextualized story of the song; it allowed anyone to read their own memories into this deliberately un-specific story of two unknown soldiers.

Also, due to its slow, melancholic melody contemporaries experienced the song as a mournful tribute to the dead soldiers.¹⁴⁷ At the Volkstrauertag in 1927 an observer experienced the atmosphere as “deeply poignant” and claims to have seen how “everyone was shut in some deep inner contemplation the second the song’s first tones were struck”.¹⁴⁸ This must have been an effect of both the intimate relation most of the attendees already had with the song, but also the memorable atmosphere created by the joint act of singing it at such an impressive venue, along with the musical support of a section of brass players.

For attendees of a performative ritual, its potential interpretation may be manifold. A performance does not offer a plain exegesis of its meaning while experiencing it. Rhetoric offers such an interpretation of the rituals' meaning, although often allegorically, but nonverbal performances lack that kind of exegesis completely. However, they offer an experience. The collective performance of a ritual creates, in the words of Stephan Feuchtwang, a “public emotion”.¹⁴⁹ Participants, by means of taking part in the spatial and temporal experience of a ritual, live through a public emotion that ‘does something to them’. First, the ritual did something of itself, quite logically: It brought to mind the memory of the time of war and the dead soldiers. Second, the

¹⁴⁶ Kurt Oesterle, ‘Die heimliche deutsche Hymne’, *Die Tageszeitung: taz*, 10 November 2001.

¹⁴⁷ This is probably the reason why at the Volkstrauertag musicians still perform the song to this date. However, in the meantime it is performed only in an instrumental version, without lyrics.

¹⁴⁸ Eulen, ‘Volkstrauertag 1927’, 51.

¹⁴⁹ Feuchtwang, ‘Ritual and Memory’, 283.

performative act of singing the song involved an implicit expectation from the ritual to instil a sensation that went beyond the normal and fulfilled the participants with a sense of unity.

Arguably, the VDK was conscious of that effect. It planned the song as the last performance; drummers introduced it with a slowly swelling drum roll that imbued the room for some time before the swollen uproar would abruptly end, only so the brass players could play their first melancholic tones in that sudden silence. After a few seconds the audience could join in with the beginning of the first stanza: “I once had a comrade, you won’t find a better one”.¹⁵⁰ The atmosphere was deeply reminiscent of melancholic mourning, although the drummer’s introduction added a distinctly militaristic element to it. This increased the militaristic posture of the whole ritual mentioned in chapter one, which transformed the song in such way as to not appeal to Germans of different political stripes anymore. Yet despite this (or for some rather because of it), the moment must have carried an intense emotionality. The melancholic sensation of their own memories, paired with the corporeal sensation of the music, certainly had the effect of emotionally connecting all attendees in that moment. The corporeal sensation of being present as an individual, and simultaneously being removed into something greater than a single self through the communal act of singing a song, instantiated the Volksbundideologie’s ideal image of the unity of the Volk.

Such a (corporeal) ritual creates a memory of a unifying experience for those who attended to it, and thereby teaches them an emotion with which they can identify afterwards.¹⁵¹ In that very moment the VDK made good on its promise to “unify the people in common remembrance”.¹⁵² It is only that the ‘people’ who attended were not representative of all Germans at all, but rather a small conservative elite group. The ritual of the Volkstrauertag reconstructed a unifying experience, and hence a sense of overarching reality. Other sets of ritual recreate other worlds and therefore serve other publics.¹⁵³ It is consequent to claim, then, that the VDK used the old soldier song *Ich hatt’ einen Kameraden* as element in an integrative ritual that created a nationalistic and conservative overarching reality and served only a specific social and political milieu in Weimar Germany.

¹⁵⁰ As quoted in: Kaiser, *Von Helden und Opfern*, 83.

¹⁵¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 83–84.

¹⁵² Eulen, ‘Volkstrauertag 1925’, March 1925, 18.

¹⁵³ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 116.

The closing act: a military parade outside the Reichstag

The VDK clearly designed the ritual for a certain public. The design was also not open to alternative interpretations. It was authoritative in its interpretation of the past because some implicit overarching themes – like the myth of the unity of the Volk – reoccurred in all features of the memory institution. The date of the ritual, the decoration of the plenary hall, the rhetoric of the speeches, and finally the performances show this. Hence the overall design was integrative in both appearance and meaning.

The last section further adds to these claims. It presents the fulminant militaristic parade that served as the closing act of the ritual. After the audience had listened to the last echoes of the song, all attendees left the plenary hall for a militaristic parade just outside the Reichstag. In *figure 2*, one can see the guard of honour taking its position in between the Reichstag and a large crowd of spectators. First, former field marshal Paul von Hindenburg (marked in the picture with a small black x beneath him) walked down the guard's front.



Figure 2. Der grosse Volkstrauertag am 13. März 1927.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Georg Pahl, *Der Grosse Volkstrauertag Am 13. März 1927 Vor Dem Reichstag Fand Unter Reger Anteilnahme Der Bevölkerung Statt. Reichspräsident von Hindenburg Schreitet Die*

The presence of Hindenburg can similarly be read as a political argument. At this point Hindenburg was already *Reichspräsident* (President of the German Reich), but it was his position as acting field-marshal during World War One that had made him quite popular. During the Weimar years he then represented the old Prussian militaristic order.

Together the formerly high military personnel, the guard of honour of the Reichswehr, and a military parade imposed a palpable militaristic posture on the last act of the Volkstrauertag. Historically speaking, military parades are central to politics. More so, they are almost identical to the politics of the state, as rulers used military processions to "justify their existence and order their actions in terms of a collection of stories, ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances" ever since.¹⁵⁵ For all those who attended the Volkstrauertag, their last impressions and emotions were overshadowed by the militaristic posture of this parade. It also must have looked and felt like as if the state itself would be representing itself. The VDK, then, must have been quite happy with the effect: the parade once again brought into physical existence its claim to represent the whole nation in its memory of the war.

As any public militaristic activity this parade also followed very dynamic, clear cut, and synchronised corporeal movements. After Hindenburg had taken his initial position on the steps of the Reichstag again, the parade set off. The staccato of movements, which can clearly be observed in the movements of the soldiers in *figure 3*, symbolises militaristic values like obedience and the subordination of the individual to the collective. The parade's immediacy also transports a corporeal experience to those only watching it pass by. The rhythmic power of the soldiers' simultaneous steps evokes feelings of strength and power. In that moment the group imagines itself as dynamic and strong, and if the spectator imagines himself to be part of that group, he himself might identify with such sentiments. The intense corporeal experience of the parade de-emphasised the mournful atmosphere of the interior of the Reichstag's plenary hall or the melancholic tunes of the closing song. The act of imagining the nation as full of strength and power can be read as the attempt by the VDK to bring into

Front Der Ehrenkompanie Ab., 13 March 1927, Photograph, 13 March 1927, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.

¹⁵⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, 3. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 164.

physical existence its claim of a national resurrection born from a Volk united in a joint remembrance of the past.



Figure 3. Die Reichswehr.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Anonymous, *Die Reichswehr. Abbringen Der Fahnen Alter Regimenter Beim Volkstrauertag in Berlin.*, Photograph, 1932, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.

Conclusion

Within recent years historians have paid increasingly more attention to the shadows the First World War had cast upon the Weimar Republic. They have shown how the memory of the war constituted an important platform for contestation among opposing political groups.¹⁵⁷ Yet, vocal voices in the historiographical debate have identified a lack of forms of commemoration with satisfactory meaning-giving power on that very platform.¹⁵⁸ The war veterans, so their claim, were a crucial factor in the radicalisation of politics towards the end of the Republic. Their traumas were caused by their inability to make sense of the random defeat and the lack of a *rite de passage* that would have aided them to explain in symbolic imagery their experiences. None of Weimar's memory actors provided satisfactory redemption, but only the symbolic politics of the national-socialists. As this thesis has shown the ritual of the Volkstrauertag, however, was a consistent and complete form of war commemoration. It included repetitive choreographies, invested meanings, and strong imagery – in short, a complete ritual – certainly fit to provide explanations and sentiments of communalities to those longing for them, given they approved of identical political beliefs.

The Volkstrauertag therefore fully matches what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have famously called an *invented tradition*.¹⁵⁹ Through a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, the VDK invented a memorial-day tradition with a function that was highly ideological. As Hobsbawm and Ranger claim, invented traditions seek to “inculcate certain values and norms by forging continuity with a *suitable* past”, which seems to be an exact description of the Volkstrauertag and its function.¹⁶⁰

Only a few years after the war, the VDK succeeded to invent and institutionalize the Volkstrauertag as a memorial-day ritual dedicated to the dead soldiers. A thorough analysis of the KGF and additional secondary sources in chapter one has shown that already by 1925 the VDK had accomplished to find symbolic expression for its Volksbundideologie. The core characteristic thereof is the belief in a transcendent spiritual unity of the Volk. Although various political groups made use of the template trope, namely the ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft, the VDK charged it with an inherently conservative, nationalistic, and

¹⁵⁷ Inter alia: Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*; Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*; Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914*; Kramer, ‘The First World War and German Memory’; Achilles, ‘Anchoring the Nation in the Democratic Form’; Bryden, ‘Heroes and Martyrs of the Republic’.

¹⁵⁸ Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*.

¹⁵⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1–7.

¹⁶⁰ Italics mine. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 6.

more importantly militaristic and vengeful memory of the war. For instance, the choice for a date in spring reminiscent of a need for national resurrection after the humiliation of defeat articulates these values, as does the highly authoritative characterisation of the temporary site of ritual as a militaristic and nationalistic site of memory. The speeches delivered at the yearly occasion, scrutinised in chapter two, further mirror the politicisation of the war memory. The speakers evoked a mythical unity among the German people and soldiers alike, whose death they portrayed as a heroic sacrifice for the fatherland. They reutilized the ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* in a way that left no room for alternative readings and hence exemplifies the essential goal of memory politics to assume authority over the many individual memories of a society. The ritual served a particular public only. In chapter three this becomes even clearer, for the VDK fashioned the performative aspects of the practised symbol as instantiations of its own political ideology. By singing a popular soldier song reminiscent of military postures, it instantiated its ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* in a corporeal experience. Finally, the official manner and state-like character of the military parade lent weight to the VDK's claim to conduct a truly *national* memorial-day.

However, only the capital of the Reich was resplendent in the powerful garment of a state ritual. The argument of this thesis, then, only applies to a geographically bound place. This spatial restriction neglects all local activities. The one-dimensional meaning of the ritual is strictly confined to what happened in Berlin. While the VDK-leadership was in tight control of the national version of the *Volkstrauertag*, the more removed the event was from the national branch, the more the degree of control lessened. Localism and strong regional identifications surely shaped the ritual of the regional branches in significant ways. This is therefore not an analysis of the ritual of the *Volkstrauertag* as it took place in the Reich in its many varieties, but only in its limited quasi-official form. However, it should be noted that the local branches of the VDK were likely to consist of a similar membership-base drawn from the same social-milieu as its leadership. Also, the radio broadcasts certainly aided the nationwide spread of the narrative exegesis offered by the speeches at the *Volkstrauertag* in Berlin.

This thesis reaffirms historiographical assumptions about the inherent interconnection between political identity and memory, within which the character of the latter is very much a result of the former, in Weimar Germany. The VDK remembered the war in an idealised and heroic way, in which images such as unconditional unity in the face of a great menace and firm belief in the righteousness of the national cause formed a powerful expression of a political ideology. This was evidently a memory-proposal meant to serve only a certain public. It was nevertheless a comprehensive and significant offer in symbolic explanation and redemption to many of those seeking remedy for their sufferings. The *Volkstrauertag* should consequently assume its righteous position in the study of memory of Weimar Germany. As

this thesis has demonstrated, historians can no longer maintain a lack of symbolic politics, but have to instead acknowledge the existence of a diverse and highly contested culture of memory politics.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ I am grateful to Marin, James, Inge, and Ricky for their incessant support and valuable criticism throughout the duration of this project. I am particularly thankful for the unwavering guidance of our supervisor Dr. Rachel Gillet. Her contributions to this thesis cannot be overestimated. I also would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Jochen Hung who, with important advice and encouraging conversations helped this project to get on its feet. Lastly, I wish to thank my grandparents, Heinz and Elfriede, without whose foresight my studies at Utrecht University would not have been possible in the first place.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Ich hatt' einen Kameraden.

German Text (written by Ludwig Uhland in 1809)	English Translation
<p>Ich hatt' einen Kameraden, Einen bessern findst du nit. Die Trommel schlug zum Streite, Er ging an meiner Seite In gleichem Schritt und Tritt.</p> <p>Eine Kugel kam geflogen: Gilt's mir oder gilt es dir? Ihn hat es weggerissen, Er liegt zu meinen Füßen Als wär's ein Stück von mir.</p> <p>Will mir die Hand noch reichen, Derweil ich eben lad. Kann dir die Hand nicht geben, Bleib du im ew'gen Leben Mein guter Kamerad!</p>	<p>I once had a comrade, You will find no better. The drum called us to battle, He walked by my side, In the same pace and step.</p> <p>A bullet came a-flying, Is it my turn or yours? He was swept away, He lies at my feet, As though he were a part of me.</p> <p>He still reaches out his hand to me, When I am about to reload. I cannot hold onto your hand, You stay in eternal life My good comrade.</p>